

ITALIAN FASCISM

ORIGINS OF AN IDEA



Christophe Borsella

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Dedicated to the Italians – A Great People

Sempre Avanti!

“It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep.”

– Benito Mussolini

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Preface

It is not the purpose of this work to serve as a critical analysis of Italian Fascism, nor is it intended to serve as either a history of Fascist Italy or a biography of its leader Benito Mussolini. On the contrary, this work is limited in its scope and not intended to cover anywhere near the entirety of the vast Italian Fascist experience. For this, one can consult countless other works that have already been published and from a variety of perspectives.

The actual purpose of this work is twofold: 1) To provide the reader with a detailed account of the ideological origins of Fascism as a uniquely Italian idea derived from a multiplicity of Thought-Deed philosophies which can be found all across the political spectrum; 2) to trace the historical rise of Fascism up to and including its victory in attaining political power, and to go no further. Again, it is not the purpose of this work to serve as an overly ambitious history or a biased ideological critique.

That the Italian Fascist ideology and experience had its ups and downs, its pros and cons, is without question. However, it is the author's intention to let the historical and ideological facts stand alone, and thus to let the reader digest the information herein

without the typical liberal bias which permeates our society via the mainstream media.

Finally, it is the author's wish for the reader to attain a new appreciation for the period of history covered within the pages of this book, and to delve deeper into the subject of Italian Fascism with an objective and unbiased mindset.

Whether or not the author was objective enough to fulfill the above-stated goals is for the reader to decide.

**Christophe Borsella
Long Island, NY
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CHAPTER ONE

Italy's Fascist Roots

Unlike Italian civilization, the Italian *nation* is a relatively new construct – a product of liberal nineteenth century thinking. It was founded by men who were deeply influenced by the great liberal movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – men like Giuseppe Mazzini, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour and, of course, the great Giuseppe Garibaldi.

These men dreamt of a united Italy that was free from the foreign domination that had dominated the peninsula since the last days of the Western Roman Empire. In the nineteenth century, a series of wars were fought with Austria to make their dream a reality. This period of Italian Unification, the *Risorgimento*, lasted approximately ten years, from 1861 to 1871. In the end, Italy emerged victorious as one nation. Unfortunately, her problems as a unified state were only just beginning.

In 1882, the year the great Garibaldi died (and one year before a boy named Benito was born in the Romagna), a law was passed granting every Italian citizen, who completed elementary school, the right to vote. While this certainly looked “egalitarian” on

paper, the reality was that even ten years after the law had been passed, less than 10 percent of Italian citizens were eligible to vote. The simple fact was: most Italians at this time did not possess any official schooling whatsoever. The poverty, lack of education and general disunity of post-Unification Italy was evident. The nation did not represent all of its people, only the bureaucratic interests of the urban based government in Rome and northern Italy.

For nearly the first hundred years of the Italian nation's existence, the vast majority of Italians were taxed without actual representation. They did not vote, and moreover *they could not vote* for leaders of their own choosing. Thus, the successive ruling governments in Rome were far removed from the grim realities of life in peasant Italy. Ever greater numbers of Italians were faced with two options: *emigrate* or become, as one writer put it, "one of those innumerable peasants overburdened with debts and taxes, [losing] whatever little they had owned [only to] become members of the vast army of *braccianti*, those miserable day-laborers."¹

A recurrent theme in Italian politics and society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the restoration of dignity to the "once great" Italian people, who had now been reduced in the hierarchy of European nations to a dishonorable status – one reserved only for paupers and migrants. Writers and intellectuals, such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Giovanni Pascoli, championed proletarian Italy against

plutocratic nations like Britain and France. While these latter nations were rabidly looking to dominate and exploit vast portions of the globe for sheer profit (hence to make the richest one percent even richer), Italy embarked on a civilizing mission to resettle its seemingly endless population of workers. Hence the idea of the *noble empire*. Against this historical backdrop, the Fascist concrete of the future was being mixed.

It can be argued that Benito Mussolini's future career as a statesman was less defined by his "invention" of Fascism, both in theory and practice, than by old remnants of Italian *Crispism*. Francesco Crispi was Italy's Prime Minister between 1887 and 1896. He served two inconsecutive terms during this period. Sicilian by birth, the young Crispi had been an idealistic revolutionary who had played an instrumental role in Italian Unification, having served under Garibaldi. Later on in his political career, Crispi turned into a pragmatic authoritarian. The historian Max Gallo described Prime Minister Crispi thus:

[T]he artisan of a policy of reaction and repression, projected himself as the defender of order against the extremist parties, even attempted a reconciliation with the Vatican, and, above all, undertook a program of prestige that culminated in an alliance with Germany and a colonial adventure in Abyssinia.²

And, much like his German allies, Crispi harbored a particular disdain for France – the greatest "Latin"

power in the world; a title he had hoped his Italy could eventually attain.

Like Gallo, other historians such as Christopher Duggan have drawn much attention to the similarities between the political careers of Francesco Crispi and Benito Mussolini. Some have even seen a mirror image in the two figures. At the very least, *Crispism* is considered to be the direct predecessor of Mussolinian Fascism.³

When one studies Mussolini's political career, one finds the following pre-war highlights: (1) the 1929 Lateran Pacts, improving Italo-Vatican relations; (2) the 1935-36 Fascist invasion of Abyssinia that sought to bring prestige to Italy and avenge Crispi's prior defeat at Adowa; (3) a determined foreign policy seeking to bring Italy and Germany closer together; (4) a resentment of French influence in the Mediterranean. Prophetically, Mussolini's father was even said to have told the young Benito: "You will be the Crispi of tomorrow."⁴

Of course, Mussolini's revolutionary youth and political activism would have driven his father to make such a statement. Nevertheless, the future Duce's break with the Far Left and his turn to the radical Right was remarkably similar to Crispi's own political journey.

And like Crispi himself, the revolutionary *Fascio* groups were also born in Sicily. The word *fascio* literally means "bundle" or "sheaf." In nineteenth century Italy the ancient bundle of rods (or *fascies* in

Latin) came to symbolize collective strength and unity, as it did in Roman times. Workers' *Fasci* first surfaced in Palermo in 1892 and then rapidly spread throughout Sicily. Representing the extreme Left, the *Fasci Siciliani* called for the redistribution of land and the lowering of taxes. The peasant-based movement was particularly violent and short-lived, even while other socialist and anarchist movements were still functioning in Italy at this time, especially in the urban North.

Crispi's second term in office replaced the impotent administration of Giovanni Giolitti and put an effective end to the disturbances in Sicily. Crispi's regime not only arrested *Fasci* leaders, but also detained a long list of possible sympathizers from many different backgrounds: students, progressives, poor farmers, anarchists, certain professionals, anti-monarchists and others.

While the crackdown was effective enough, the word *fascio* lived on, becoming a popular term to describe groups of revolutionaries. Its ancient origins, denoting Roman power and strength in unity, also made the term appealing to those on the radical Right. The rods and the axe, carried by the *lictors* of old Rome, were glorified in mythic symbolism like the emblems of other extremist political movements.

Around the time of World War I, National Syndicalists like Alceste de Ambris became imbued with the idea of the *fascio* representing the national

collective. Soon others used the term to describe their own political movements. One individual, in particular, we shall learn more about in the upcoming chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Forces of the Radical Right

To better understand the phenomena of Fascism one must first gain an understanding of modern, pre-Fascist Italian history and the movements that would eventually influence the formation of Fascism and the Fascist era. Ever since the *Risorgimento*, the Italian nation had been burdened with a crippling national debt and corrupt Roman governments. To rid themselves of debt, government after government turned to the military industrial complex, increasing the production of arms as a source of revenue. Doing this, of course, meant borrowing more money and ultimately *digging a deeper hole of debt*.

Regardless, borrowing ever vaster sums of money was the only perceivable way that Italian leaders could convince their fragile governments – whose members of parliament represented both the political Left and Right – to approve government spending. In the age of European nationalism, military spending was always justified as a “defensive measure” against a nation’s enemies and rivals. Thus a political culture of militarization developed in nineteenth century Italy, which lasted well into the twentieth until the end of World War II.

As the twentieth century commenced, there was a sharp increase in new and exciting technologies which revolutionized society. From automobiles and airplanes to giant factories and mechanized warfare, there were now exceptionally swift methods of travel, manufacturing and, of course, *killing* people. Everywhere in the Western World, society was racing toward the modern age of technology. It is easy to see why many contemporary individuals tended to glorify such an exciting time.

I. Futurism

The Futurists were a group of young Italian artists and intellectuals whose movement, aptly named *Futurism*, was rooted in their young country's nationalist pride and in the messianic belief that new technology would cleanse Italy of its decadent ways. The Futurists detested the fact that many artists and intellectuals were still hung up on nineteenth century Romanticism; they wanted to radically transform society in their own image. Although they drew back upon the glorious Italian past to boldly forecast future Italian greatness, that is where their love affair with history ended.

The Italian nationalist sentiment of the time was enough to send the Futurists into seemingly delirious tirades of poetry, painting and militant manifestos all praising the rapid advance of technology and its destructive capabilities. In the name of art they praised the courageous life, the dare-devil, the risk-taker, the

man who was neither afraid to live life to the fullest nor to die heroically. At last, this was an artform, a genre, that recognized no morality and admitted no cowards into its fold. Indeed, Futurism was the herald, the archetype, the direct philosophical ancestor of Fascism.

Futurism's acclaimed ideological founder was the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. He was the first artist to compose an accepted manifesto detailing the movement's beliefs. Written in 1909, the document is titled "The Futurist Manifesto" and consists of eleven points or articles full of the kind of masculine, life-affirming rhetoric described above. Let the reader be the judge:

1. We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness.
2. The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt.
3. Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber. We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist.
4. We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath...a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.

5. We want to sing the man at the wheel, the ideal axis of which crosses the earth, itself hurled along its orbit.
6. The poet must spend himself with warmth, glamour and prodigality to increase the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements.
7. Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.
8. We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.
9. We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world-militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill and contempt for woman.
10. We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.
11. We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the

thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds.⁵

Thus, Futurism can best be described as an *intellectual culture of militarism*. Contrary to the humanist tradition so deeply rooted in Italian civilization, Futurism represented a definite break with all the moralistic creeds that had endlessly flowed out of the Enlightenment. While it was neither a religion nor a political philosophy, Futurism peddled an almost *spiritual* view of the twentieth century's new industrial technologies and the cathartically destructive abilities they possessed.

Indeed, the Futurists "cleansed" themselves of all sentimentality except extreme patriotism and loyalty to the nation. But they were far from "conservative" in their views. As the Futurists proudly affirmed in their own writings, they sought to tear down, conflagrate, ravage, kill, obliterate – all in the name of making Italy *not just great*, but the one supreme nation on earth. And this preeminent status could only be achieved through the extreme mechanization of the entire nation. Yes, here was finally a tradition – at once both materialist and spiritual – that rebelled against the

well-established twin pillars of nineteenth century positivism: *rationality* and *egalitarianism*.

The intellectualism and artistic dynamism of the new Futurist worldview had undoubtedly given the Futurist movement a quasi-mystical appeal in turn-of-the-century Italy. It is easy to see how, later on, the Fascists would be drawn to this artistic movement, as it provided ample building blocks for the construction of a new cultural ideal and a new society. Hence, the Fascists would push Futurist emulation in state art and architecture. Futurists, in turn, were attracted to the fledgling Fascist ideology, and largely for the same reasons that had made Futurism so appealing – its revolutionary message, its bellicosity, its audacity, its celebration of courage, and its sheer contempt for the decadent old order of things.

Politically, Futurism was a wild call against the old expended ways of liberal democracy and its ineptitude at handling real problems, of which Italy had many: poverty, crime, political instability, malnutrition, emigration, illiteracy, etc. There was also a longing on the part of this movement to not only restore Italy to its past level of Roman greatness, but to supersede it and create an entirely new Italian world culture and empire. This is evident in another short work by Marinetti, written the year Italy entered the First World War, entitled “War, the World’s Only Hygiene” (1915):

We Futurists, who for over two years, scorned by the Lame and Paralyzed, have glorified the love of danger and violence, praised patriotism and

war, the hygiene of the world, are happy to finally experience this great Futurist hour of Italy, while the foul tribe of pacifists huddles dying in the deep cellars of the ridiculous palace at The Hague.

We have recently had the pleasure of fighting in the streets with the most fervent adversaries of the war, and shouting in their faces our firm beliefs:

1. All liberties should be given to the individual and the collectivity, save that of being cowardly.
2. Let it be proclaimed that the word Italy should prevail over the word Freedom.
3. Let the tiresome memory of Roman greatness be cancelled by an Italian greatness a hundred times greater.

For us today, Italy has the shape and power of a fine Dreadnought battleship with its squadron of torpedo-boat islands. Proud to feel that the martial fervor throughout the Nation is equal to ours, we urge the Italian government, Futurist at last, to magnify all the national ambitions, disdaining the stupid accusations of piracy, and proclaim the birth of Panitalianism.

Futurist poets, painters, sculptors, and musicians of Italy! As long as the war lasts let us set aside our verse, our brushes, scalpels, and orchestras! The red holidays of genius have begun! There is nothing for us to admire today but the dreadful symphonies of the shrapnels and the mad sculptures that our inspired artillery molds among the masses of the enemy.⁶

An even greater example of Italian nationalism, “Against Xenomania,” was written by Marinetti sixteen years later (one year before Mussolini’s “Doctrine of Fascism” debuted). It was published in the *Gazzetta del Popolo* (Turin), 24 September 1931:

A futurist manifesto addressed to the leaders of society & the intelligentsia.

Despite the Imperial strength of Fascism, the words xenomania, xenomane, which we have invented, are unfortunately becoming more indispensable every day.

1. Xenomanes &* therefore guilty of anti-Italianism, are those young Italians who fall into a cretinous ecstasy before all foreigners, even now the world crisis is robbing these people of their wealth; they fall in love with them out of snobbishness & sometimes marry them, absolving them from all defects (arrogance, bad manners, anti-Italianism, or ugliness) simply because they don’t speak the Italian language & come from distant countries about which little or nothing is known.
2. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are world-famous Italian artistic performers (singers, musicians, orchestral conductors) when they grow so self-important that they forget the performer is the useful but not the necessary servant of

* Marinetti uses the ampersand (in place of the word “and”) throughout this particular manifesto.

creative genius. For example: the excellent & celebrated orchestral conductor Arturo Toscanini, who put his personal success before the prestige of his country by disowning his own national hymns in the name of artistic delicacy & opportunistically playing foreign anthems.

3. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian orchestral conductors & audiences who organize or applaud concerts abroad using little or no Italian music. Elementary patriotism demands that at least half the music on the programme should be by modern or Futurist Italian composers instead of music by Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, etc... which is already enjoyed, understood & admired by everyone to the point of satiety.
4. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian audiences who applaud instead of booing foreign orchestra conductors when they are so ill-mannered as to ignore Italian music in their concerts in Italy.
5. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian industrialists who find a thousand reasons to avoid a decisive battle with foreign industry & are proud to win international competitions with products, machines or appliances not entirely conceived & made in Italy.
6. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the military historians & critics

who in our great victorious war dwell on negligible episodes such as Caporetto.

7. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the illustrious men of letters who denigrate abroad the whole of Italian literature (which today is original, varied & entertaining), each one in the hope of appearing to be a very great genius amid a nation of mediocre illiterates.
8. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian painters, sculptors & architects who, like many twentieth-century personalities & many rationalists, prefer to declare themselves heirs of French, Spanish & Swiss innovators like Cezanne, Picasso, Le Corbusier, rather than sons of real, authentic Italian innovators like Boccioni, creator of the new sculpture & Sant'Elia, creator of the new architecture.
9. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are those public meetings which instead of branding as infamy the offensive writings & publications by Italian writers against Italy, our armed forces & great victorious war, define them as 'permissible errors'.
10. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the hoteliers & shopkeepers who ignore the prompt & effective means at their disposal to promote Italian influence in the world (by the use of Italian language in notices, on signs & on menus), forgetting that foreigners, in love with the countryside &

climate of Italy, can also admire & study its language.

11. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are those aristocratic & upper middle-class Italian ladies who are infatuated with foreign customs & snobbisms. For example: the American snobbism surrounding alcohol & the fashion for cocktail parties – perhaps suitable for the North American people but certainly poisonous to our people. Therefore we consider vulgar & foolish the Italian woman who proudly participates in cocktail parties & that sort of alcoholic competitiveness. Vulgar & foolish is the Italian woman who thinks it more elegant to say ‘I’ve drunk four cocktails’ than ‘I’ve eaten a bowl of minestrone’. She is only submitting herself to the foreigner’s envied financial superiority, a superiority now destroyed by the world crisis.

Elegant Italian ladies, we beg that instead of the cocktail party you hold early evening get-togethers which you could call, if you like, Mrs. B’s Asti Spumante. Countess C’s Barbaresco or Princess D’s White Capri. At these gatherings a prize will be given to the best wine for such meetings. & let’s drop the word ‘bar’ & give it an Italian name: *quisibeve* (*qui si beve*).

12. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian men & women who give the Roman salute & then ask sentimentally for foreign products in the

shops, casting a skeptical & pessimistic glance at Italian products.

13. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian audiences who, seized by a critical mania, systematically disparage Italian films & theatre, thus encouraging the invasion of mediocre foreign films and plays.
14. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are the Italian impresarios who look abroad for stage designers & scene painters, neglecting the Italian ones, who are capable of teaching the world.
15. Xenomanes & therefore guilty of anti-Italianism are Italy's critics & cultivated gentlemen, whose brains were awakened & sharpened by Italian Futurism but who nonetheless criticize & neglect it in their rush to discover & praise foreign Futurisms, all derived from our own. As anti-Italians they forget, for example, this explicit statement made to an Italian journalist by the English Futurist poet Ezra Pound: 'The movement that I, Eliot, Joyce & others began in London could not have existed without Italian Futurism', & this equally explicit declaration by Antoine in the Paris Journal: 'In the decorative arts the roads were opened some time ago by the school of Marinetti'.

Other nations, under-populated, & who are not criticized or menaced by foreign enemies, can doze in the drowsy hum of easily assuaged revolutionary plots & consider national pride an object of luxury.

But our virile proud dynamic & dramatic peninsula, envied & threatened on all sides, poised to realize its immense destiny, must consider national pride as its first law of life.

Therefore we Futurists, who twenty years ago cried at the top of our socially-democratically-communistically-clerically-parliamentarily-softened voices: ‘The word Italy must rule over the word Liberty!’, today proclaim:

- a) The word Italy must rule over the word genius.
- b) The word Italy must rule over the word intelligence.
- c) The word Italy must rule over the words culture & statistics.
- d) The word Italy must rule over the word truth.

The fire of criticism may be directed against foreign nations if necessary, but never against Italy.

Plenary indulgence in art & in life towards real patriots, that is to say the Fascists who tremble with an authentic passion for Italy & with indefatigable Italian pride.

As for the many skeptics & defeatists (literary men, artists, philosophers & blue-stockings) who try today, amid the uncertainty of an unstable peace, to build one of their doubly careless ivory towers

dedicated to the enemy, we say quite brutally:

Remember that Italy does not need to vaunt its distant past. Its grandeur lies in the present, based above all on the creative power of its poets & artists. Galileo, Volta, Ferraris, Marconi & the first transatlantic flight by a Fascist squadron, thought up by Mussolini & directed by Balbo, assure it supremacy in machine civilization. This supremacy certainly cannot belong to populous nations who banked on 'trust standard & over production' who did not see the world crisis coming, & are now dying of it.

Always remember this Italian masterpiece which is even greater than the Divine Comedy: the battle 'Vittorio Veneto'.

In the name of this masterpiece, symbolized by the wreckage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which our armored divisions had to overpower on the road to Tarvisio, we, at the first alert, will shoot anti-Italian xenomanes.

I write all this with the calm of a determined patriot, I who have been much applauded abroad, & have had more jeers than cheers in Italy, & nonetheless give thanks every day to the cosmic powers that gave me the high honor of being born Italian.

Before the reader dismisses Marinetti's work as an extreme case of xenophobic nationalism, it is important to understand Futurism's psychological origin. As an artistic movement and worldview, Futurism was conceived in an age that witnessed massive technological innovation and yet also great disparity between rich and poor nations, of which Italy was to be counted among the latter. On top of this was the fact that Italy had suffered from a massive inferiority complex for some 1400 years, ever since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, when roving bands of Germanic tribes had overrun the peninsula and begun their subsequent domination of Europe.

Of course, the 1870 *Risorgimento* greatly helped to restore a sense of pride to Italian patriots, but the scars of oppression remained. At the start of the twentieth century, united Italy was a brand-new geopolitical entity, yet her artists and intellectuals continued to be overlooked by the more powerful nations of Europe. This reality was certainly resented by all capable Italians.

Marinetti and his followers were driven by a new kind of reactionary radicalism. They believed that both their nation and themselves deserved greater recognition on the world stage – that Italy's resurgence, in terms of art and politics, superseded the greatness of the Italian past. And furthermore, as Futurists, Marinetti's faction believed, with all the zeal of a new religious sect, that Italy's future grandeur would be unsurpassable. The Futurists did all they

could to promote their worldview which some might label as “chauvinistic.”

At the apex of the Age of Nationalism, the Futurist doctrine found wide support. Benito Mussolini was one such supporter. Indeed, his Fascist speeches and writings contained many Futurist elements. Especially those statements, like the following, which openly broke with ancient nostalgia, favoring instead the hyper-modern industrial Italy of the future:

I think I have succeeded in making the Allies and other peoples of Europe, who had not yet attained a true vision of Italy, see her as she really is. Not as something vaguely prehistoric, not the Italy of monuments and libraries...but Italy as I see her born under my eyes, the Italy of today, overflowing with vitality, prepared to give herself a new lease of life, pregnant with serenity and beauty; an Italy which does not live like a parasite on the past, but is prepared to build up her own future with her own forces and through her own work and martyrdom.⁷

* * *

I maintain that Rome can become an industrial centre. The Romans must be the first to disdain to live solely upon their memories. The Coliseum and the Forum are glories of the past, but we must build up the glories of today and of tomorrow. We belong to the generation of builders who, by work and discipline, with hands and brains, desire to reach the ultimate and longed-for goal, greatness

of the future nation, which will be a nation of producers and not of parasites.⁸

Overall, the Futurist influence on Fascism was quite significant, but it died early on. Although several noteworthy Futurist buildings were constructed during Mussolini's reign, Futurism and Fascism grew ever more apart as time went on. It is true that both *-isms* shared a messianic belief in a future glorious civilization – a masculine, industrial, bellicose, heroic, *Italian* civilization. However, the Futurists, like the syndicalists (whom we shall soon learn about), were generally disappointed with how the Fascist revolution turned out. Many had not expected Mussolini's reign to be a compromise with (if not a total victory *for*) the forces of capital and conservatism. They had truly believed that a new era of anti-traditional radicalism had begun with the celebrated March on Rome. But it did not.

II. Neoconservatism

The Italian neoconservatives were another faction who promoted future glories for the Italian nation based on the realities of history, culture, political necessity and *Destiny* itself. They were nationalists, first and foremost. But, like their Futurist contemporaries, they were also radicals. They wanted change.

In the 1890s Italian conservatives tried building a right-wing alliance around tariff protection, military

expenditures and a policy of colonialism in order to halt the spread of liberalism. They failed. Traditional conservative tactics proved futile, convincing many that the burgeoning era of democratic or “mass” politics had to be defeated another way. Enter the *neocons*.

The neoconservatives of late nineteenth century Italy turned to the philosophy of integralism, which combined a devout nationalism with the concept of the organic nation. This was a political philosophy that championed the belief that the nation is the highest living organism possessing a life all its own – that everything and everyone else were component parts of that organism, all having a supreme duty to maintain order and to hold the body (or what was called the *corporate state*) together.

The Italian neocons followed the example of Germany’s first chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. This meant that they linked nationalism to their conservative political agenda. Up until this point, nationalism had been associated with the ideals of classical liberalism, which had spawned the mid-nineteenth century wars of national liberation in Italy and Germany. By the 1890s the neocons in these countries (and other European states) had successfully separated nationalism from liberalism. Alexander De Grand thus described the new neocon nationalism in his book, *The Italian Nationalist Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy*:

These neoconservatives considered the nation to be the supreme and most natural expression of the community. Within the framework of the nation they called for a hierarchical and corporative social order to take the place of the existing liberal parliamentary one. To bolster the social order, neoconservatism also demanded reconciliation between the national bourgeoisie and the Church. In foreign policy, it called for a shift from class struggle within the nation to an aggressive, imperialist foreign policy. Thus, the new authoritarianism was a multifaceted response to socialism, democracy, pacifism, and liberalism.⁹

Neoconservatism was the answer to overcoming the forces of the Left in the new era of mass politics, not only in Italy but across all of Western Europe. In France, not long after the national embarrassment of the so-called “Dreyfus Affair,” the neoconservative *Action Française* advocated for a complete political alternative to liberal democracy. Likewise, the Italian Nationalist Association was a neoconservative organization that was founded soon after the humiliating Italian defeat at the Battle of Adowa (during the First Italo-Abyssinian War). The INA’s main grievance was that liberal democracy was leading the Italian nation to ruin.

Though clearly reactionary, the neocon movement symbolized a noble rebellion, a conservative radicalism against defeatism and anti-nationalism. This new movement appealed to the impatient

generation that was coming of age politically in the 1890s and 1900s. The young people of the time were infatuated with speed, action, dynamism, technology, all the key elements forecasted in the religion of the next century – Futurism. These youngsters resented the long-winded parliamentary debates, the political compromises and omnipresent corruption which had defined their parents' era. Naturally then, they had no use whatsoever for their parents' positivistic, materialist and (in their view) thoroughly *outdated* political philosophies. To be sure, many youngsters considered parliamentarianism a disease of both the individual soul and the nation. This was the climate in which Marinetti developed his hardly unique belief system.

The neoconservatism of the radical Right thus took on a definite shape, glorifying all things having to do with aristocratic struggle and action, and deploring everything associated with socialism, utilitarianism and cowardly democratic compromise. De Grand expounds on what the terms “parliament” and “anti-parliament” came to mean during this period:

Antiparliamentary symbolized a defense of virility and of aristocracy that parliament destroyed by a system of universal suffrage in which the major aim was to be elected and to stay elected. To be against parliament meant to be for selection of the best, for freedom from artificial and confusing political positions. Parliament meant opportunism, bargaining within a closed world of the capital and its power brokers. On the

other side was the mystical, the ideal world in which lines could be drawn. War represented action which was the opposite of parliament, that was why the young were so enthusiastic for any kind of conflict, from class struggle to international violence, and why, in 1915, they hailed Italy's entry into World War I as a great victory over parliament.¹⁰

It is easy to see how those who broke with the traditional Left, such as the syndicalists and World War I interventionists, also found the radical Right appealing. The call to action against corrupt bourgeois society was too tempting to ignore. From the philosophies of Georges Sorel, Vilfredo Pareto, Charles Maurras and others, a new nationalist ideology was forming.

And from the beginning, the Italian neocons had been careful not to inject any mystical or racialist currents into the mainstream of their Italian Nationalist Association, as Italy has always been an ethnically diverse peninsula consisting, essentially, of a Mediterranean south and Alpine-Nordic north. The Germans and French had taken a different path in their nationalist organizations, but the Italians did not want to upset their country's modern economic and political progress by disturbing the cultural sensitivities of the existing social order. They simply wanted to represent the extreme Right of the political spectrum and to win over as many middle-class supporters as possible.

Herein lies a contradiction in the agenda of Italy's radical Right: it felt very much at ease attacking the parliamentary system and labeling it *bourgeois* and *corrupted*, yet the radical Right was itself backed and endorsed by some of the most powerful forces within the Italian bourgeoisie. This contradiction would last all through the Fascist era, as Mussolini made a number of concessions to Big Business, the Monarchy and the Church.

Between 1903 and 1915 the liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti initiated gradual institutional reform, giving greater rights to workers, acknowledging the right to strike, and approving universal suffrage in 1913. The neocons rejected these developments. What they did not reject, however, was a willingness to work with other groups to achieve their aims – hence a willingness to accept the politics of a new society increasingly shaped by popular politics and mass movements.

The leaders of the Italian Nationalist Association understood this. And so, they stood in solidarity with pro-war liberals, conservatives and interventionists of all stripes during the period of Italian neutrality (1914-1915). During the war the neocons maintained their alliance strategy, establishing relations with the nationalist segments of the Left and converting as many to their cause as possible. When the war ended the neocons found their mass base of support in the veterans' groups and then in Fascism itself.

Two of the founding fathers of Italian neoconservatism were Giovanni Papini and Enrico Corradini. Through their newspaper, *Il Regno*, they established a strong nationalist following. De Grand informs us that the newspaper emphasized five main themes which would become the ideological pillars of twentieth century Italian nationalism:

[1] Social Darwinism, [2] romantic imperialism, [3] pessimism about the ability of the Latin peoples to compete with Germans and Anglo-Saxons, [4] contempt for democracy, which was viewed as rule by the weak, and [5] an emphasis on will over reason and violence over restraint.¹¹

Actually, the man who laid the groundwork for these views was neither Papini nor Corradini, but Mario Morasso, a proto-futurist and romantic imperialist. Morasso had an almost perverse love for machinery and power.

In his book, *L'imperialismo nel secolo XX*, Morasso argued that civilization was not heading in a democratic direction but toward a violent new order based on the rule of force (not law), where struggle between both nations and individuals increased over the control of markets in a technologically oriented society. Whereas the nineteenth century was defined by humanitarian ideals, the twentieth would be defined by blood and conquest. At the very core of this new power system would not be democracy, but the great mechanical revolution. Continuous efforts would need to be made in order to grab new energy sources. The

power of financial magnates like J.P. Morgan would also grow proportionally, as available resources diminished. Such individuals would be the new masters of the world.

Here one can see that Morasso's economic argument was not untrue. In fact, it was absolutely prophetic, as today the world's richest 400 companies are plundering the earth, ravaging pristine environments for natural resources and pursuing profit wherever it can be found. Morasso's political worldview, heralding the death of nineteenth century positivism, would be adopted years later by the Fascists and incorporated into Mussolini's *Doctrine of Fascism* in 1932.

Like its nationalist counterpart, neoconservatism is defined by five distinguishing characteristics: 1) a belief in the self-made man; 2) free trade; 3) staunch nationalism with imperialist overtones; 4) a break with history and thus an emphasis on looking toward future glories rather than relying exclusively on the past; 5) the utilization of mass media to propagate their message.

Neocon radicalism is evident in the last three points, and these three points (numbers 3, 4 and 5) show exactly how neoconservatism differs from classical conservatism. As the latter greatly favors: isolationism, the preservation of existing borders, historical romanticism, and the foregoing of any attempt to appeal to a mass or democratic society, relying instead

on the old snobbisms of the aristocratic traditions. As much as Papini and Corradini railed against the mass society, they still relied on tactics of modern mass propaganda to appeal to as wide an audience as possible – something which was abhorrent to the old conservative tradition.

True European conservatism in the nineteenth century meant *monarchism*. This political outlook was best represented in Tsarist Russia where the aloof ruling class did not care at all about democratic values or popular opinion. The 1905 victory of Japan over Russia proved to folks like Corradini that Tsarist Russia was not a successful model of imperialism or conservatism in the new century; it was an over-bloated bear stuck in its old ways and resistant to change.

Truly, if imperialism was to succeed in the modern age it *required* mass support. This then is another contradiction of neoconservatism and eventually Fascism – it holds a great disdain for mass society, yet a willingness to work within its confines and to even use that mass society, by way of demagoguery, as an instrument in attaining power. The radical Right validated this contradiction by maintaining that they represented the true interests of the people as agents of *qualitative* democracy, not *quantitative* liberal democracy.

The strongest ingredient in Italian neoconservatism which held the entire movement together was its

contempt for socialism and liberal democracy. De Grand makes this point very clear:

Corradini's concept of the nation left little room for either socialism or liberal democracy. The state was a living organism, separate from and superior to the individuals who composed it. Internal struggle represented a danger to the vitality of the organism and a dispersion of its energies. Liberalism, with its doctrine of individual rights, opened the door to just such conflicts which, given the weakness of the Italian state, automatically led to anarchy. The socialists, using democratic, pacifist, and antimilitarist propaganda, hoped to weaken the will of the ruling bourgeoisie. Only imperialist nationalism offered a program of recovery to the middle classes, while liberalism left them with no hope of resistance.¹²

It is quite evident that the middle-classes were the main target audience of the Neocons who maintained that the democratic system was merely a front behind which the bourgeoisie (liberals) and the workers (socialists) wielded their political clout. According to Giuseppe Prezzolini and other figures in the neocon movement, the middle-classes contributed most to the Italian nation and yet they received the least.

Another major feature of the Italian neocon movement was its endorsement of an aggressive Roman Catholic religion, one that had very little to do with Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. While not outwardly theocratic, neoconservatism did put its faith

in sublime power. Again, I cite De Grand: “Corradini contrasted the submissive and pacifist nature of primitive Christianity with the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the Roman Catholic Church, which had inherited the imperial and civilizing mission of the Roman Emperors.”¹³

Between 1903 – when the newspaper *Il Regno* was founded – and World War I, a number of other Italian nationalist and neocon newspapers came into being. They included *Tricolore*, *Grande Italia*, *Caroccio*, *Nave*, and *Mare Nostro*. It was during this time that papers like the *Tricolore* attempted to fuse radical syndicalism (which we will learn more about in the upcoming chapters) with conservatism and imperialism. What all the papers had in common was this one basic principle: *Patriotism is the highest duty of all citizens*. And soon, the people’s patriotism would be put to the test.

The 1911-12 Italo-Turkish War, which led to Italy’s conquest of Libya, was a rallying point around which the nationalists, Futurists and pro-war radicals all came together. The war was a clear-cut victory for the neocon agenda. Among the famous Leftists who supported Italy’s drive toward war were Arturo Labriola (a longtime “unorthodox” Marxist) and Angelo Olivetti. Even supposedly apolitical humanitarian types, like the poet Pascoli, supported the war.

Many looked at the war from a social perspective. They saw the conquest of Turkish occupied Libya as a solution for Italy's massive emigration problem, as millions had gone abroad in the previous 20-year period looking for work. The loss of an enormous supply of virile, laboring youths, in the prime of their lives, was a source of great national shame for Italy. Writers and politicians alike had referred to Italy as a "proletarian empire," not rich in land or natural resources, but in people. All that was needed was an outlet for this surplus population that desired work and sustenance. What Italy needed was her own *lebensraum* or "living space" – the same thing Germany desired in both World Wars.

Thus, war was declared in September 1911. To sell the conflict to the Italian people, Prime Minister Giolitti spoke of Turkish treachery and resistance to Italy's economic advances in Libya, and also about the civilizing mission that Italy had a responsibility to uphold. On the eve of war, Giolitti gave the Turkish government a 24-hour ultimatum to concede to Italian demands. In all fairness, the Turks did display a willingness to negotiate, but Giolitti still went to war eagerly and as *unpreparedly* as ever. Italy's unreadiness is best described by historian Denis Mack Smith in his book *Italy: A Modern History*:

The general unpreparedness and overconfidence was quickly apparent. Although Tripoli had been an objective of policy for decades, neither the nature of its tribal society nor even its

geographical features had been adequately studied. The diplomats had been in such a hurry with their ultimatum that they had given little warning to the armed services. Ships had to sail with provisions for a single day, and it was over a week after hostilities began before an army corps was ready to embark. General Caneva had little idea how to fight a mobile war against guerillas. His chief of staff, General Pollio, had mistakenly assumed that Turkey, unable to send reinforcements, would surrender after a token protest. He also made the expensive miscalculation that the local Arabs would oppose their Turkish masters and coreligionists or would at least remain neutral, and that twenty thousand soldiers would therefore be sufficient.¹⁴

Because of these miscalculations Italy was dragged into a conflict which was longer and more costly than expected. Worse, the local Arabs, previously assumed to be friendly toward the “liberating” Italians, had proved themselves to be tougher on the battlefield than their Turkish overlords. Libya was, after all, their beloved homeland. Un-uniformed guerillas inflicted many casualties behind Italian lines. And after certain Catholic bishops spoke of the conflict in terms of a “new crusade,” the Arabs turned their cause into a full-scale *jihad*.

These developments, however negative they may have been, did not keep Italy from being victorious. By 1912, Libya was subdued, and Turkey defeated. The Dodecanese islands in the eastern Mediterranean were

also conquered. The neocons had their first real victory, as did the Futurists who could now boast that the victorious Italians were the first people to use airplanes as instruments of war. Furthermore, millions of impoverished Italians (mainly Southerners) could go about settling vast tracts of fertile land in the new Libyan colony.

There were only two problems. For one thing, Libya was hardly a Garden of Eden, as only a thin strip of land hugging the coastline could be classified as arable; essentially Libya had the same agricultural problem as Southern Italy – the land that could be farmed was simply exhausted. As a result, there were hardly any Italians who migrated to Libya. While millions of poor Italian peasants (or *contadini*) left annually for the United States and other parts of the developed world, only 2,800 Italians could be found in Libya as late as 1928.¹⁵

Although a good number of politicians and writers believed that a colonial empire would change things for the better, it did not. The Libyan desert proved to be nothing more than a money pit for the Italian government. The neocons and nationalists would claim the war was a victory for the Fatherland. But it was not. Italy's reckless imperial policy of gobbling up any unmarked land in sight, at huge economic and human cost, would set the country up for future disasters. Not learning from conflicts like the First Italo-Abyssinian War (1895-96), Italy would be doomed to repeat her errors in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War (1935-36)

and World War II. Even in her victorious struggles, like the Italo-Turkish War and World War I, Italy still suffered high casualties due to unpreparedness and underestimating the enemy.

Overall, the “strongman” leaders who had led Italy in these conflicts were a far cry from their ancient Roman counterparts whom they invoked so many times in their speeches. The day was coming when one particular strongman promised to restore dignity to Italy, and to resurrect the unrivaled greatness of ancient Rome; to restore Italy’s ancient birthright in the modern age in order to create the *Future Rome* – a Rome that would be more powerful and glorious than any past or present civilization. That strongman’s name was Benito Mussolini.

CHAPTER THREE

Mussolini – A Radical Youth

The study of Italian Fascism is the study of Benito Mussolini – they are one and the same. Mussolini's own turbulent background of struggle and overcoming personified his self-constructed ideology of Fascism.

Mussolini was born to a Leftist father and a devout Catholic mother. Politically, Mussolini started out as a socialist before turning to the radical Right. As the reader shall observe, Fascism incorporated philosophical elements of both left- and right-wing political theory – just as Mussolini contained these elements in his mind and soul, which were then laid bare in his writings and speeches.

Despite what one might think of him personally, Mussolini was a talented and resourceful politician who made good use of his writing and oratory skills, not to mention his incredible ability to lead from the front. He was thus able to fuse together diverse political forces, such as the radicals, Futurists and nationalists.

Benito Mussolini was born on July 29, 1883 in Predappio, a village in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. His birth name was Benito Amilcare

Andrea Mussolini – a tribute by his socialist father to three revolutionaries: the Mexican Benito Juarez, and the Italians Amilcare Cipriani and Andrea Costa.

Growing up, Mussolini's childhood and adolescence seemed to be as volatile as his future political career. At school he conducted himself in such a manner that would have aroused envy in even the most truculent of reform school brats – stoning and stabbing classmates, stealing food and disrupting class. Eventually he would outgrow his wild streak and go on to graduate with a school-master's degree.

In 1902 Mussolini went to Switzerland. While working there in the unskilled trades like thousands of other Italian *contadini*, and even being homeless for an extended period, Mussolini was attracted to the socialist political scene. At this particular time and place in history there were many famous philosophers and revolutionaries living in Switzerland. In Lausanne, Mussolini attended the lectures of the economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto – no doubt he absorbed as much as possible while living in Switzerland. Nevertheless, it wasn't long before the future *Duce* got homesick and decided to return to his beloved Italia.

From this time until the outbreak of World War I, Mussolini remained a stalwart socialist, committing himself to agitating on behalf of labor and editing socialist newspapers – first, *La Lotta di Classe* (The Class Struggle), and then *Avanti*, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party. Ever given to extremes,

Mussolini was labeled a Socialist of the Far Left by his comrades. Regardless, at this stage of his political life Mussolini *did* promote mainstream socialist beliefs such as pacifism and internationalism. These beliefs would be put to the test when, in 1911, Italy went to war with Turkey over the possession of Libya. As far as his socialist convictions were concerned, Mussolini passed the test. Whereas the Futurists and nationalists supported war, Mussolini was vocally against it. In fact, he had even been jailed several times for his anti-war activity and his participation in labor strikes.

To be sure, the young charismatic Mussolini was a socialist prodigy, easily making a name for himself and his party. His election to the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party and his editorship of *Avanti* came about as the Leftist hardliners consolidated power within the party's ranks and expelled those who were considered too partial to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Amadeo Bordiga, the future co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, and Karl Liebknecht, the famous German Communist, were among Mussolini's close associates. Many who were around him at this time thought Mussolini just might be the next great socialist "messiah." Even compared to a revolutionary leader like Vladimir Lenin, Mussolini still came out ahead, as the latter was more widely read, a much better orator and also fluent in several different languages.

Between the 1890s and World War I, there had been a great crisis within Marxism. The simple world

envisioned by Marx, divided between the working class and the bourgeoisie, was getting more complex. Far from there being a state of imminent revolution, workers were actually experiencing significant wage increases and fragmentation was now developing within the working classes of the Western industrialized nations.

Different interests had now manifested themselves – interests that Marx had not foreseen. Technology had not been impeded as Marx had predicted, but instead continued to advance; industrial concentration was not increasing in the hands of only a few capitalists, and yet the number of wealthy capitalist investors *was* increasing; and the workers of the world, far from “uniting,” were actually putting their national interests above whatever little class consciousness they possessed. Furthermore, the writings of scholars like Böhm-Bawerk had convinced many followers of Marx that the “Red Prophet” did not have a solution to the “great contradiction” between Volumes I and II of his *Das Kapital* and the actual behavior of prices.¹⁶

Soon Marxist “revisionists” sprung up on both the Left and the Right of orthodox Marxism. Among those on the Far Left were the syndicalists – they accepted much of Eduard Bernstein’s arguments (the so-called “father of revisionism”), but rejected parliamentary reform in favor of violent revolutionary means over the myth of the general strike. The syndicalists were strongly opposed to working within the realm of parliamentary democracy. Many styled themselves as

“productionists,” urging workers not to strike but to forcibly take over the factories and expel the bosses. Productionism supported all those who contributed to the economic output of society as a whole. Even “production minded bourgeois individuals” were embraced rather than opposed (as long as they were not production-minded *owners or bosses*). This uniquely syndicalist outlook contributed to later Fascist thought, with its emphasis on class-collaborating “producers.”¹⁷

It was during this period, between the 1890s and World War I, that the most revolutionary segments of the Left – from the followers of Vladimir Lenin to the syndicalists of Georges Sorel – placed an increasing emphasis on the role of the proletarian vanguard or party elites. This was the result of setbacks which were not foreseen by Marx, such as the growing nationalism within the proletariat of each country and this class’s willingness, or even *preference*, to accept better working conditions through reform.

Naturally, many came to the conclusion that workers were instinctively reformist and what workers “needed” were *leaders*. Pareto’s “Circulation of Elites” reinforced this belief, maintaining that an active minority had always shaped history and would continue to do so. Gustave Le Bon’s book *The Psychology of Crowds* (1895) also confirmed that the masses were naturally irrational and sheepish, thus they required strong leaders to guide them. Because many syndicalists came to despise the inertness of the

masses, they gradually shifted their support from the workers' movement over to the nationalist cause.

Against this political *mise-en-scène*, Benito Mussolini's personal convictions matured and his proto-fascist views took on a definite form. As early as 1908, Mussolini displayed signs of embracing the elitist, anti-rational views of Sorel, Pareto and Le Bon. He began using a word that would last with him all through the Fascist era – *gerarchia* (hierarchy). From about 1912 onward, Mussolini's socialist comrades began noticing significant changes in his speech. No longer was he speaking in "class conscious" terms, using words like "proletariat" and "bourgeoisie." His main concern now was the "Italian People" and "Nation" – such nationalist words and phrases would appear more and more in Mussolini's writing and oratory.

It was his long-suppressed nationalism and his support for Italy's entrance into the World War that changed things politically for Mussolini. In the past, Mussolini had gotten into physical fights defending the cause of socialism in Italy, France and Switzerland. But now he flirted with interventionism and outright militarism. The man he immediately started talking to was Filippo Naldi – the owner of *Il Resto del Carlino*, a pro-war newspaper connected to the Italian Foreign Ministry and the wealthy landowners of the Emilia region. Naldi sensed a journalistic genius in Mussolini and clearly wanted him to write for the pro-war interventionist side of Italian politics.

On October 18, 1914 Mussolini wrote: “Do we as human beings or as socialists wish to be the lifeless spectators of this grandiose drama?”¹⁸ Two days later in Bologna, he was relieved from his position as editor of *Avanti*. His increasingly bellicose stance and impassioned calls for war ultimately caused Mussolini to have a great falling out with his socialist comrades. It was then, in November of 1914, that Mussolini founded *Il Popolo d’Italia* – a newspaper which clearly supported the territorial-expansionist idea of *Italia Irredenta* or “Unredeemed Italy.”

The two aphorisms he immediately attached to the paper accurately described his new political sentiments: “***Revolution is an idea that has found its bayonets***” and “***He who has a sword has bread.***” (The first is taken from Napoleon and the second from Blanqui.)

Mussolini wooed his growing army of readers with interventionist statements that could only be written in his own superbly rhetorical style – eloquent, bombastic and flamboyant as ever. And yet, even on the warpath, Mussolini made it known that he still supported his original socialist views. As one writer observed, Mussolini believed that “war would lead to social revolution in Italy.”¹⁹ Of course, Mussolini still wanted to win over to his side as many radicals and old comrades as was feasible, yet this is secondary to the greater overarching development that was unfolding in the Fascist narrative. And that was: Benito Mussolini’s

once radical voice was noticeably turning ever more conservative, and ever more nationalist.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nationalist Awakening

On January 15, 1915, Mussolini and other Left interventionists met in Milan to discuss their political plans. From this meeting came the *Fasci d'azione rivoluzionaria* – the Fasci of Revolutionary Action. This was a time when it was not uncommon for both nationalists and radicals (and all factions in between) to openly support intervention in the Great War. Without a doubt, the call to nationalism was heard all across Europe, arousing the patriotic passions of otherwise peaceful men and conquering them with a sublime frenzy of emotion. And, depending on one's political background, there were a variety of justifications for war. Some wanted to rid their nation of "foreign oppression" once and for all, others championed the cause of territorial expansion, and still others looked to the war as a means to achieve social revolution. In the unique case of the burgeoning Fascists, all of the above were sound rationales.

The "interventionists," as they were broadly referred to, championed the pro-war position all over Italy. They were ubiquitous in public life, even managing to break into the Chamber of Deputies in Rome to brawl with neutralist deputies who opposed war with Austria

and Germany. King Victor Emmanuel III reportedly told one senator, “I must make war; otherwise there will be revolution.”²⁰ And so, war was declared.

In May of 1915, the Kingdom of Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, breaking the Triple Alliance agreement it had with Austria and Germany, and entered into the conflict on the side of Britain and France. While the Austrians and Germans certainly viewed this as a stab in the back, Italian nationalists had a long-standing desire to claim (or *re-claim* as they saw it) large parts of the teetering Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly the Trentino region and Dalmatia. This desire to conquer and readmit into Italy those Italian cultural regions outside the official borders of the Italian state was referred to as *Italia Irredenta* or “Unredeemed Italy.” Thus, Italy went off to war – a very costly war, in terms of both lives lost and economics.

Foreshadowing the military debacles of the Second World War, the Italian army was greatly lacking in military preparedness on a scale comparable only to Tsarist Russia. Obsolete weapons, insufficient artillery, a lack of skilled commanding officers, unsanitary conditions and other deficiencies aided the Austrian side in its initial military success against Italy. So much so that in the first months of combat, some 66,000 Italians were killed and another 190,000 wounded.

Shortly after war was declared, Mussolini enlisted in the army and went off to serve on the Austrian front, as both an Italian patriot and an example to those of his countrymen who were hesitant to join up. One could say whatever they wish about Mussolini in retrospect, but his personal courage and love of homeland were beyond question. Upon being wounded in action, Mussolini returned to his editor's desk at *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

Then came Caporetto – the infamous battle that nearly knocked Italy out of the war. This demoralizing Italian defeat was a deciding factor, like the war itself, in pushing Mussolini and his newspaper to the Far Right. In the wake of Caporetto, Mussolini wrote a column condemning the liberals and parliamentarians for contributing to Italy's military misfortunes. In another column he stated: "The entire nation should be militarized. Let us forget about the rights of individual freedom. Invasion of our territory is a national grief."²¹

Relentlessly, Mussolini lambasted the anti-war socialists for their defeatist propaganda and ignominious cowardice. By 1918, *Il Popolo* became the unofficial organ of the disillusioned Italian soldiers returning home to a country that was being destroyed from within by treacherous Leftists and traitorous politicians.

On May 24, 1918, the third anniversary of Italy's entry into the war, Benito Mussolini let his political

ambitions be known. Speaking to a crowd in the municipal theater in Bologna, he declared:

Soldiers, ladies, gentlemen: Without the war our nation's valor would have been extinguished. Italy can no longer be portrayed in the apron of an innkeeper. We are and we wish to be a nation of producers. We who have survived, we who have come through, claim the right to govern Italy.²²

In August, *Il Popolo's* title was changed from "A Socialist Daily" to "The newspaper of fighters and producers." Fighters and producers were to be canonized as the immortal saints and martyrs of a new martial religion unique to the Italian culture-soul: Fascism.

Three months later, in November of 1918, the guns on the Western Front went silent. The Great War had come to an end. Italy prevailed at the famed Battle of Vittorio Veneto and had defeated its age-old Austrian nemesis, dashing the empire of the Habsburgs to pieces. For the Italian victors this was a celebratory time of both national vindication and the denunciation of socialism which, in many circles, was now considered to be little more than a creed of supine cowardice. Austria's defeat was also viewed to be symbolic of the new century's triumph of virile ethnic nationalism over the senility of multi-ethnic empire, and thus considered a win for dynamism over decay.

Mussolini – the war hero, the activist, the journalist and political prophet of Italy’s greatness – was now hailed by his growing number of devotees as a courageous man of action. He was regarded by many to be something of a twentieth century Caesar who, like the original, was at once a citizen-soldier, leader, master of propaganda and now politician – a man who was as comfortable holding in his hand a pen (or stylus) as he was a weapon of war.

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Mussolini won over to his side ever greater swaths of the Italian populace. His declarations of unapologetic national pride were a breath of fresh air in a country that had long endured the supreme embarrassment of being considered a third-rate power in Europe, especially after the 1896 defeat of Italy in the First Italo-Ethiopian War. Mussolini’s statements now bellowed throughout the land with a resounding pride, from the Alps to Sicily, serving to eradicate all past humiliations and betrayals which were the direct cause of the nineteenth century errors of liberalism, parliamentary democracy and Marxism.

From practically all political quarters they came flocking to his side, won over by the future Duce’s statements, either in a crowd or through the press; statements like the following: “Today the Italian flag flies from the Brenner to Trieste, to Fiume, to Zara, Italian of the Italians. At home too, victory must accomplish the other purposes of the war: the redemption of the workers.”²³

Italy's victory came at a catastrophic price however. Although nominally victorious in the First World War, Italy's triumph was soon dubbed the *vittoria mutilata* or "mutilated victory." This is because after three and a half years of some of the bloodiest carnage in recorded history, 600,000 Italians were dead with nearly a million wounded. The Italian economy plunged as a result of the war. Yet the tremendous war profits made by Italy's biggest businesses – namely Fiat, Ansaldo and Ilva – facilitated the private takeover of Italy's largest banks by the owners of said businesses.

Furthermore, the British and French governments went back on their original promise to grant Italy, at war's end, half of Austrian-controlled Dalmatia (a largely Italian section of modern-day Croatia). The promise was actually an official stipulation of the 1915 Treaty of London, which was signed and ratified by Great Britain, France, Russia and Italy in order to secure the latter's entrance into the war on the side of the Triple Entente. Because the Treaty of London was purported to be "secretive" by Britain and France, these countries went back on their word and essentially stabbed Italy in the back. This of course outraged many Italians and contributed to a general feeling of victimhood combined with anti-democratic overtones, as quite obviously the Western democracies still did not consider Italy to be equal to their own nations. That 600,000 Italians gave their lives for the allied cause

meant little or nothing to the major powers. The hypocrisy could not be clearer.

The social and economic crises which plagued postwar Italy brought, needless to say, mass despair to millions, as prices for goods increased dramatically and food shortages were rampant. The value of money had changed, especially when New York and London ended their exchange controls in March 1919.²⁴ Returning soldiers also found themselves in a hostile labor market that did not want them.

As political and economic conditions deteriorated, a sharp divide was drawn between the patriotic-nationalist Right and the liberal-socialist Left. Among the embittered masses of the Right were the teeming numbers of unemployed war veterans, landless peasants, and pro-nationalist workers who were now jobless. In addition to these groups, which formed the basis of the patriotic-nationalist Right, were added the traditionalists and wealthier types who sympathized with the anti-communist message of Mussolini; these included wealthy landowners, protective industrialists, a number of aristocratic elements and of course many conservative Catholic activists. Among all these groups Mussolini's popularity rose substantially.

The Italian poet and war hero Gabriele D'Annunzio also rose to prominence as a nationalist figure in postwar Italy when he and his followers occupied the city of Fiume. This bold action was in response to the allied agreement to hand over the Italian city of Fiume

to the newly created nation of Yugoslavia. The gifting of Italian Fiume to the Slavs was unconscionable in the opinion of Italian nationalists. Had Italy not just won a war (and a very costly one at that!) against Austria-Hungary, a nation that marshaled entire divisions of South Slavs to fight against Italy? Why should Italian Fiume all of a sudden be transformed into “Rijeka,” a fictitious new burg in some inorganic, multiethnic South Slav nation-state which, itself, seemed to be a pathetic Wilsonian mimicry of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire? Where is the historical basis for such an outrage to be recognized in international law? D’Annunzio had asked all these questions and, without a reply, took it upon himself to take action.

Already heavily influenced by traditional Italian nationalism and Marinetti’s Futurist movement, D’Annunzio led a force of black shirted army veterans to occupy Fiume. The color black symbolized the uniforms of the elite *Arditi* shock troops (literally: “the daring ones”) – a unit composed of war veterans whose intimidating skull-and-dagger banner had been flown high above them in countless battles against the Austrians.

Upon entering Fiume victorious, D’Annunzio addressed its people waving the blood-stained flag of a fallen comrade: “I who volunteered, I who fought, I who was wounded, call upon the France of Victor Hugo, the England of Milton, the America of Lincoln and Walt Whitman, and I speak for the will of the whole sacred nation of Italy when I proclaim the

annexation of Fiume to Italy.”²⁵ This was D’Annunzio in all his grandiosity.

His colorful rule of Fiume was the first time since the French Revolution that a European state relied so heavily on its civic religion to control the masses. D’Annunzio’s brilliant use of political liturgy combined theatrical governance (e.g., balcony speeches) with secular and religious symbolism to reinforce his authority and ensure the popular enthusiasm (and even euphoria) of the masses. The Fiume leader’s heroic pageantry greatly impressed Benito Mussolini, so much so that Mussolini had shrewdly considered D’Annunzio to be a potential political rival.

On March 23, 1919, the *Fasci di Combattimento* (Fascist Fighting Groups) was born. This was a new political movement created by Mussolini that borrowed much of its rites and rituals from D’Annunzio, including the black shirts, the Roman salute, the balcony speeches and the massive rallies. The creation of the *Fasci di Combattimento* essentially marked the birth of Fascism in Italy, and let the outside world know that Fascism was no longer just a veteran’s club philosophy, but an actual physical force to be reckoned with. As such, the core of the new group’s support base was comprised of a variety of nationalist Italian groups, particularly right-wing patriots, ex-soldiers from the *Arditi*, and the Futurists.

The *Fasci di Combattimento* committed itself to carrying out four main goals: 1) support for the demands of war veterans; 2) support for the concept of Italian irredentism and particularly the annexation of Fiume and Dalmatia; 3) opposition to foreign imperialism; 4) sabotage of the election campaigns of other parties by any means necessary. The president of this task force was the sculptor and ex-Ardito Ferruccio Vecchi.

In the postwar period Mussolini grew very close to the *Arditi*. As men who were used to charging enemy Austrian lines with nothing but daggers and hand grenades, the *Arditi* veterans were accorded an elite status within the ranks of Mussolini's growing movement. Essentially, they were something of an early Italian prototype to Hitler's future well-oiled machine: the *Schutzstaffel*. And much like the future SS, the *Arditi* banner was black with an unmistakably chilling image of a skull biting a dagger. Naturally enough, the *Arditi* themselves wore black uniforms with their weapon of choice (the dagger) neatly tucked inside their belts.

The most interesting thing to come out of the March 23rd meeting was its detailed and truly revolutionary 11-point program, which called for:

- 1) Universal suffrage.
- 2) A newly elected national assembly to prepare a new constitution.

- 3) The abolition of the Senate (which was more of an elitist country-club than a chamber of government).
- 4) The nationalization of Italy's arms and munitions factories.
- 5) The creation of a national militia.
- 6) Workers' councils to control factories, railroads and public services.
- 7) The establishment of a minimum wage and the eight-hour work day.
- 8) The introduction of social security.
- 9) The seizing of war profits.
- 10) The seizing of certain Church property.
- 11) Steep inheritance and income taxes.

Thus, Fascism finally had a plan of action and hence a definite direction to take, even if it still lacked a definitive form and destination. In fact, citing how Fascism is less of a meticulously detailed creed than an impassioned call to arms, Mussolini would go on to champion the slogan, "Fascism is Action."

In the March 23rd issue of his newspaper, Mussolini wrote: "We [Fascists] allow ourselves the luxury of being aristocrats and democrats, conservatives and progressives, reactionaries and revolutionaries, legalist or illegalist, depending on circumstances of time, place, and situation."²⁶ While these might seem like conflicting or contradictory positions to take, they were all necessary ingredients in putting together the nascent Fascist recipe.

Fascism owed its birth to the common grievances of disgruntled war veterans, anti-communist workers, peasants, small business owners, even dispossessed landowners – essentially those elements that could be described by Marxists as “petty bourgeois.” At any rate, the above segments of society were indeed marginalized, alienated, and even oppressed in postwar Italy. Their shared victimization came from two sources, which is to say from *two sides of the same coin*: International Finance (i.e., Big Business) and International Socialism (i.e., Marxism).

In essence, the budding Fascist versus anti-Fascist struggle was, at its very core, a political and social battle between Nationalists and Internationalists. Indeed, this was not a conventional Right versus Left conflict, as many renegade Leftists, fleeing the ranks of International Socialism, had found a new home in the growing Fascist movement. Moreover, the influence of the *nationalist* Left was very visible in the official policies of the early Fascists. One can see this in the “Fascist Manifesto” that was published in the June 6, 1919 issue of *Il Popolo d'Italia*. The manifesto’s contents were divided into four sections; political, social, military, and financial (as below):

Political Demands:

- Universal suffrage polled on a regional basis, with proportional representation and voting and electoral office eligibility for women.

- Representation at the government level of newly created National Councils organized by economic sector.
- The abolition of the Italian Senate.[†]
- The formation of a National Council of experts for labor, industry, transportation, communications, public health, etc. The selected experts would be professionals and tradesmen with legislative powers, and elected directly to a General Commission with ministerial powers.[‡]

Labor & Social Policy:

- The immediate enactment of a law that sanctions an eight-hour workday for all workers.
- The establishment of a viable minimum wage.
- The participation of workers' representatives in the functions of industry commissions.
- Reorganization of the railways and the transport sector.

[†] During this period in history, appointments to the Italian Senate were made directly by the King, as a sort of extended council of the Crown.

[‡] This concept was rooted in corporatist ideology and derived in part from Catholic social doctrine.

- Revision on the draft law on invalidity insurance.
- Reduction of the retirement age from 65 to 55.

Military Affairs:

- The creation of a short-service national militia with optimal defensive capabilities.
- The nationalization of all armaments factories.
- Revision of all contracts for military provisions.
- A peaceful yet competitive foreign policy.

Economic Policy:

- A strong progressive tax on capital.
- A partial expropriation of concentrated wealth.
- The seizure of 85 percent of the profits on all military contracts.
- The seizure of all the possessions of the religious congregations and the abolition of all the bishoprics which constitute an enormous liability on the nation and on the privileges of the poor.

Quite plainly one can see that the Fascists created a program for Italy which was progressive if not totally revolutionary for the time. It was a farsighted national platform of class collaboration that could technically be classified as “social democratic” yet certainly not in

the Marxist sense. Thus, the Fascist program was refreshing to both the urban proletariat and the exploited middle classes, as it contained something for everyone. The toiling masses would embrace its labor reform measures and the call for wider democracy, women would embrace the quest for franchise reform, veterans would benefit from the redistribution of war profits, etc.

On the other hand, the Church, Big Business, the Monarchy and the political elites did not stand to gain much from the proposals outlined above. The fact that these archconservative groups would eventually ally themselves with Mussolini's government demonstrated the overall weakness of the entire political Right in the face of the growing Marxist threat.

CHAPTER FIVE

From Revolution to Reaction

By late 1919, the Fascist movement was an urban, northern based movement with a mere thousand members or so. Its main opposition came from the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI) – the Popular Party – which was funded by the Vatican and heavily supported by the peasant masses of the South. To gain greater support for his new political movement, Mussolini turned to his chief organ of propaganda, his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

When editorializing it was said that Benito Mussolini was deftly able to “be all things to all men, both monarchist and republican, socialist and conservative, and imperialist and anti-imperialist.”²⁷ This was in no small measure due to the fact that he himself had been all over the political spectrum, from one end to the other, throughout his entire life. As such, Mussolini understood better than most the kind of politics that appealed to the average man. The same could not be said of the typical political hack party bosses and fanatical theorists that were in great abundance at this

time in Italian politics. Such types were profoundly out of touch with the common man.

Meanwhile the years 1919 to 1920 witnessed a sharp rise in postwar riots, strikes and violence. Victorious soldiers returning home from the front were not greeted with ticker-tape parades, but with mass unemployment. Before the war began, Italy's General Confederation of Labor had 1,159,000 members. When the war ended its membership grew to 2,200,000. The membership of the Italian Confederation of Workers also increased considerably.

In the four years leading up to World War I, labor strikes had caused Italy's economy to lose 4 million man-hours. After the war, in 1919 alone, striking was responsible for the loss of 22 million man-hours. A year later that figure jumped to 30 million. Such was the scope of labor disruptions all over the nation.²⁸

In 1920 the turmoil climaxed. When many thousands of industrial workers were threatened by their employers with a lockout, they called for the takeover of factories. The relationship between workers and employers was at an all-time low. Smelling blood, communist agents moved in to drive further wedges between the working class and peasantry on the one hand, and the rest of so-called "bourgeois" society on the other.

Continued communist agitation – or what could rightly be called the *communist exploitation* of the working class – had caused many proletarians in the North to turn to the Socialist Party for answers. However, the Socialists were themselves divided between reformists who wanted to gain concessions for workers through parliament, and those on the Far Left who supported the creation of Soviet-style workers’ councils; this latter position was led by Antonio Gramsci. The factions fought each other – both verbally and physically. Naturally enough, in this time of profound chaos, Fascism’s focused yet fervent call for *order* resonated with a large percentage of the Italian people, especially those who were conservative and still traditionally minded.

Between 1919 and 1920, 145 people were killed and another 444 wounded in Italy’s non-stop labor violence. The “Red Years” of the postwar era had begun in April 1920 when ninety thousand industrial workers, claiming allegiance to communist agitator Antonio Gramsci, occupied northern factories and hoisted the red flag. This “mini-revolution” involved some four million workers. Gramsci thus issued the following statement in the name of the factory workers: “The present stage of the class struggle is the stage that precedes either the conquest of political power by the revolutionary proletariat or a fearful

reaction by the propertied class and the government caste.”²⁹

Indeed, the summer of 1920 saw a great deal of “revolutionary” activity in Italy. From the Po Valley down to Sicily, criminal elements of the peasantry, largely bandits and brigands, were illegally seizing land and committing heinous atrocities in the countryside against rich landowners and peasants alike. Meanwhile, in the industrial North, communists were forcibly occupying the arms factories and – because their numbers were so high – were even able to bully locally stationed police and army troops into supporting them. Nevertheless, by autumn the revolutionary momentum dissipated.

The Fascists mobilized to take advantage of the situation. Now was Mussolini’s chance to unleash his veteran black shirts, the *squadristi*, on the criminal elements terrorizing Italy. Without warning they would swoop down on a bandit, beat him publicly and make him serve as a disgraced example to other would-be criminals in the community. The message was clear: Fascist justice is swift, ruthless and *effective*.

In praise of Fascist methods, peasants’ leagues often transferred their entire membership over to Fascist labor unions. At this stage, prior to obtaining preeminent political power, Fascism dispensed with the tiresome old plan of persuading socialists to join its

ranks. In January of 1922, Mussolini had this to say in his newspaper *Gerarchia* (i.e., *Hierarchy*): "It is possible that in the nineteenth century capitalism needed democracy; today it can get along without it. The process of the reestablishment of the Right is already visible."³⁰ By this time, the Fascist movement reached 250,000 members. Without a doubt, Mussolini convinced many that *he alone* was the Man of Destiny who could save Italy from the Red Plague that was infecting the nation on all fronts. Driven by his paternal love for his countrymen, Mussolini stated the following:

... Italy, in its first half-century of united political renaissance, has seen classes armed one against the other.

Every year there was a general strike; every year the fertile Po Valley, for instance, was subjected to recurring agitations which imperiled crops and all production. Opposed to that humane sense of harmony which should be a duty upon citizens of the same Fatherland, there was a chronic struggle of interests, egged on by the professional Socialists, the syndicalist organizers, a struggle against a middle class which, in turn, persisted in its position of negation and of expectation of a messiah. Civil life did not move a decisive step forward on the way toward betterment.

A country like ours, which has no rich resources in the earth, which has mountains for half of its

area, cannot have great economic possibilities. If, then, the citizens become naturally quarrelsome, if classes have a tendency to strive to annihilate each other, civil life can have none of that rhythm necessary for developing a modern people. The Liberal and Democratic state, in spite of upheavals, recurrent every year, and even at every season, held to a noncommittal stand, selecting a characteristic slogan: "Neither reaction, nor revolution," – as if that phrase had a precise or, indeed, any meaning whatsoever!

It was necessary to emerge from the base, clannish habit of class competition and to put aside hates and enmities. After the war [i.e., World War I], especially following the subversive propaganda of Lenin, ill-will had reached perilous proportions. Agitations and strikes usually were accompanied by fights, with dead and wounded men as the result. The people went back to work with souls full of hate against the class of the masters, which, rightly or wrongly, was considered so idiotically lacking in vision as to surpass in this regard any other middle class in the world. Between the peasants and the rising industry of the urban centers there were also the phenomena of unmistakable misunderstanding. All of our life was dominated by demagogy. Every one was disposed to tolerate, to pretend to understand, to make concessions to the violence of the crowd. But after every incident of disorder, some new

situation promised another and even more difficult problem of conflict.

It was necessary, in my opinion, to create a political atmosphere which would allow men in government to have some degree of courage, to speak harsh truths, to affirm rights, only after having exacted duties, and, if necessary, imposing these duties. Liberalism and Democracy were only attempted remedies of milk-and-water character; they exhausted their energies in the halls of parliament. Leading that agitation were employees of the state, railroad men and postmen and troublesome elements. The authority of the state was a kitten handled to death. In such a situation, mere pity and tolerance would have been criminal. Liberalism and Democracy, which had abdicated their duty at every turn, failed utterly to appraise and adjust the rights and duties of the various classes in Italian life. Fascism has done it!³¹

Through an unbridled campaign of popular outreach and recruitment, the Fascist movement in Italy reached 250,000 members by 1921. Thus, Mussolini convinced a large portion of the Italian population that he alone could save Italy from the Bolshevik threat (i.e., the socialist disruption of public life). The “Man of Iron” myth was gradually developing.

CHAPTER SIX

The Consolidation of Power

The weakness of liberal Italian politics, mixed of course with the rampant socialist disruption of Italian civil life and society, was actually one of the greatest allies Mussolini could have ever hope for. Quite frankly, the mounting popular outrage against liberalism had helped him assume power, in the same way that the ultra-liberal Weimar Republic had indirectly helped Hitler a decade later.

The fifth and final government of the octogenarian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti (installed in 1920) – followed by the governments of Ivanoe Bonomi and Luigi Facta (in 1921 and 1922) – did not enjoy popular support among the Italian citizenry. The Catholic *Partito Popolare Italiano* and the Socialist PSI were the two strongest political parties in pre-Fascist Italy. Like Giolitti himself, liberal democracy had increasingly been viewed by the people as an exhausted, outdated relic teetering on the verge of extinction.

In order to maintain his position at the helm of the Italian state, Giolitti extended an open invitation to

share power with Mussolini in a National Bloc coalition. The Fascists, who up until this point remained a movement outside the political sphere, were overjoyed at the prospect of wielding power within the legal confines of the parliamentary establishment. Thus, Mussolini accepted Giolitti's offer. What followed was the dismantling of Italy's thoroughly impotent liberal democracy.

In return for the Fascists' political support, Giolitti looked the other way while Mussolini's black shirts (or *squadristi*) took control of one city and regional government after the other, thereby undermining, quite ironically, whatever was left of Giolitti's own political power in the process. The Fascists also had the good fortune of being supported by Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III – a man who commanded the undying loyalty of the Italian military, and a man who naturally despised proletarian socialism and the ever-present threat of the Roman Catholic Church.

Thus, in late October 1922, after the Giolitti, Bonomi and Facta governments fell, Mussolini was officially invited by Victor Emmanuel to form a ministry and assume office as leader of Italy. This prompted the grand pageantry of Mussolini's famous "March on Rome" – a procession some 30,000 strong and of an entirely ceremonial nature. Most sources agree that the march was not a legitimate insurrection or *coup d'état*,

but merely a demonstration of the new Fascist power and vitality.

On October 31, 1922 Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini arrived in power. Nevertheless, his consolidation of power was not yet complete. Socialists still polled well in his vaunted “cradle of Fascist civilization” – the industrialized North. This was made clear in the 1924 election where Fascism triumphed mainly in the South and in the countryside among the peasantry. Mussolini had tried to bring the General Confederation of Labor into his government in order to dilute the power of the socialist labor unions in the North. Interestingly enough, however, his own Fascist Party syndicates and labor leaders prevented him from doing so. It can here be seen that Mussolini, the Supreme Leader (*Il Duce*), was considerably weaker than he was portrayed.

Peter Neville correctly points out that there were five main “special interest” groups within the Fascist movement that needed constant appeasement: 1) the *Ras*, or heads of the squads of black shirts, who were calling for the immediate radicalization of Italian society by taking power away from the traditional elites; 2) the Fascist Left that wanted to replace the Old Left (socialists and communists) with a national syndicalist state; 3) the Fascist “technicians” and Futurists who believed their movement to be one of modernization; 4) the Nationalists who clearly wanted

Fascism to turn more overtly capitalist and imperialist in its worldview; 5) the Conservative Fascists who wanted to preserve the Italian status quo politically and economically.³²

For a time, Mussolini was forced to make political concessions even to the non-Fascists in parliament. This came in the wake of the infamous “Matteotti Affair” in 1924. Giacomo Matteotti was a Socialist deputy (i.e., representative) who was notably vocal in his opposition to Fascism. Not long after the Fascists had assumed power Matteotti was found murdered, stabbed to death with a carpenter’s file.

Of course, guilt was immediately hurled at the Fascists by their political opponents. Only three men were convicted for the murder of Matteotti, and shortly after released under the amnesty of King Victor Emmanuel III. One of the formerly convicted men, Amerigo Dumini, was in fact a prominent member of the Fascist secret police. Many believe that Mussolini knew of the plot to kill Matteotti, but did not actually give the order or have a direct hand in his killing. Others believe that the Socialists executed Matteotti themselves in order to frame the Fascists as murderous thugs.

In any event, a number of liberals, classical conservatives and Catholics came into the government as a result of pressure that was put on Mussolini in the

name of political pluralism. The radical Fascists so despised the concessions Mussolini gave the other parties that they threatened him with a “second revolution” if he did not take immediate action to silence all anti-Fascists in the nation. So strong were the radicals in their demands that Mussolini submitted by removing all non-Fascists from his government. And so, the second revolution never came. However, the threat posed by the radicals within his own Party forced Mussolini to initiate a purge.

By 1927, Mussolini rid his Fascist bureaucracy of all remaining radical elements. To his credit, this was not done by bloodletting, but by simple Party banishments and replacements. This is because any amount of bloodshed would have threatened his grip on power in a still revolutionary-prone Italy. And so, by the late 1920s, the PNF (National Fascist Party) turned decidedly middle-class and even white-collar. No longer was leftist revolution a viable route for Fascism to take. Moreover, Mussolini’s strongest backers would not go along with such a policy, particularly the Monarchy and traditional elites.

Between 1925 and 1926 there were four attempts made on Mussolini’s life by anti-Fascists. These acts initiated a series of laws that would forever change the Italian state and nation during the Fascist era.

The Christmas Eve law of 1925 asserted the rights of Italy's head of state and solidified Mussolini's rule, as Article 9 stated: "Whoever offends the Head of the Government in words or deeds, is punished with a term of imprisonment for [anywhere between] 6 to 30 months, and with a fine from 500 to 3000 lire."³³ This completed the task of the July 1924 decree which placed great restraints on the freedom of the press.

Further legislation in 1926 did the following: 1) police were given extra powers to detain and imprison people who committed cultural and political offenses; 2) the government was empowered to shut down opposition groups; 3) opposition deputies in parliament were deprived of their seats ; 4) the "Law for the Defense of the State" was passed which mandated the death penalty for those who threatened the lives of members of the government and the Royal Family; 5) political offenders were denied the right to a trial by jury – instead they were judged by a special tribunal staffed entirely by military personnel; 6) a secret police organization was created to monitor the political opposition.³⁴ Interestingly, much of this legislation was said to have been the result of Mussolini's admiration for the methods of the Soviet secret police at the time – the infamous "Cheka."

Although a modern (or "postmodern") liberal would cringe in horror at the prospect of living under a regime as politically repressive as Fascist Italy, it has been

argued that Mussolini's government was never as "totalitarian" as other contemporaneous dictatorial regimes. As one writer put it: "[Fascism] never projected a state doctrine with sufficient centralization and bureaucratization to make possible complete totalitarianism. In its original Italian meaning, the sense of the term was more circumscribed."³⁵

This is not entirely accurate. Italian Fascism did in fact have an official state doctrine which it projected to all facets of Italian society. It was simply called "The Doctrine of Fascism" and it first appeared in 1932 as an entry in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. Whether the Fascist state was ever really strong enough to implement this doctrine fully is another matter. However, the Doctrine itself was attributed to Mussolini and probably influenced (or even ghost-written) by the leading Fascist philosopher of the time, Giovanni Gentile. Still, most Italians had never read the Doctrine and could care less. What prevented Fascist Italy from becoming a truly totalitarian state was the fact that Mussolini did not have the kind of *total power* that would have been necessary in order for him to truly transform the Italian nation into the Fascist Super State (the New Roman Empire) he so adamantly envisioned. He was still heavily dependent on the backing of the Monarchy, Big Business, and the traditional elites.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rise of the Corporate State

One of the successes of Fascism was that it gained significant popular support among the Italian working class. The Confederation of Fascist Corporations, which then changed its name to the National Federation of Fascist Unions, was set up as a giant syndicate in which workers of all types were permitted to join a guild that matched their occupation and were entitled to voice any grievances they may have had in an arbitration court or to the Fascist Party itself.

Before the Fascists took over, many small businessmen, peasants, and industrial workers suffered under the policies of economic liberalism. Mussolini's policy of corporativism (aka "corporatism") sought to bring order to the nation's economy by coordinating the efforts of private and public interests under the supervision of the State. In Mussolini's own words: "Fascist guild economy is that of individuals, and also of associated groups, and also of the State."³⁶

Mussolini had wanted his followers to believe that both socialism and capitalist democracy were dying out. And, as the economic crises of the '20s and '30s worsened, it appeared to many that this was indeed the

case. The following resolution, presented by the Italian leader to his National Council of Corporations and dated November 13, 1933, describes the corporate organization of the state in its entirety:

The National Council of Corporations:

defines the Corporations as the instrument which, under the aegis of the State, carries out the integral, organic and unitarian regulation of production with a view to the expansion of the wealth, political power, and well-being of the Italian people;

declares that the number of Corporations to be formed for the main branches of production should, on principle, be adequate to meet the real needs of national economy;

establishes that the general staff of each Corporation shall include representatives of State administration, of the Fascist Party, of capital, of labor and of exports;

assigns to the Corporations as their specific tasks: conciliation, consultation (compulsory on problems of major importance) and the promulgation, through the National Council of Corporations, of laws regulating the economic activities of the country;

leaves to the Grand Council of Fascism the decision on the further developments, of a constitutional and political order, which should result from the effective formation and practical working of the Corporations.³⁷

A law, passed in March of 1930, divided the National Council of Corporations into seven sections: 1) Liberal Professions and the Arts; 2) Industry and Artisans; 3) Agriculture; 4) Commerce; 5) Land Transport and Inland Navigation; 6) Sea and Air Transport; 7) Banking. Four years later another law was passed which increased the number of Corporations to twenty-two.³⁸

In his speeches, Mussolini was always adamant in his claim that, under Fascism, Italy had overcome capitalist exploitation. Whether or not his claim was 100 percent true is not the concern of this present work. However, it can be said that under his leadership – and in no small measure due to the implementation of Corporatism – the economic sector boomed in interwar Italy.

Nonetheless, the inspiration for the Corporate State came not from Mussolini, but from two original sources: the radical syndicalists (who were always a sizeable and influential faction within the Italian Socialist Party) and the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical of Pope Leo XIII.

I. Rerum Novarum

In the author's opinion, Pope Leo XIII (reigning from 1878 to 1903) was a truly venerable Church leader. He desired to see an end to the kind of inhuman brutality employers were subjecting their workers to during the late nineteenth century. More progressive than his predecessors, Leo XIII became known as "The

Working Man's Pope." His social teaching emphasized that both capitalism and communism are flawed ideologies, and that men should not put their faith exclusively in either. The *Rerum Novarum* encyclical reflected Leo's personal convictions in addition to being the first document to represent the modern social thought of the Church.

Subtitled "On Capital and Labor," the *Rerum Novarum* focused on the rights and duties of capital and labor and argued in favor of harmony between workers and employers, binding "class to class in friendliness and good feeling."³⁹ It also supported workers' rights to form trade unions, but rejected socialism as a morally vacuous philosophy, and it affirmed a worker's right to own private property. Thus, Pope Leo XIII was one of the first political figures to define a "Third Way" philosophy between capitalism and communism. The Fascists would borrow from Leo's teachings. Most notably the concept of class collaboration.

Forty years later, Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) further expanded on Leo's work, calling for the establishment of an international system based on subsidiarity, or localism.⁴⁰ It was written in response to the economic woes produced by the Great Depression and, like the *Rerum Novarum*, it detailed corporativist thought. By this time, such thinking was ingrained in the Fascist state's ideology.

II. Syndicalism

The syndicalists' ideological father was Georges Sorel (1847-1922), a French intellectual who can be described, much like the early Fascists themselves, as both traditionalist and radical. After spending half of his life as a conservative monarchist, Sorel turned to Marxism. He accepted Marx's central doctrine: in the inevitability of class war and the destruction of capitalism. But this is where his Marxist sympathies ended. During his life, Sorel was very critical of Marxist orthodoxy. This criticism led him to favor the anarchist beliefs of Bakunin and Proudhon.

From the philosopher Henri Bergson, Sorel embraced the idea of the "myth" and its ability to sway the masses. This differed greatly from the Marxist belief in scientific materialism and evolutionary change. To Sorel, the "Idea" or the people's "Will" was enough to radically alter society. The myth of the general strike, serving to overthrow capitalism, was a prominent feature of Sorel's worldview, as was his belief in the need for direct action. From the Jacobins, Sorel inherited his positive view of violence as a necessary tool to effect change.

The Fascists also believed in the myth of *action* and the use of violence, but only in so far as these concepts worked toward the edification of the State. To the Fascist, the general strike represented chaos, or the destruction of the State. Therefore, *action* must be taken against all enemies of the State. Because he was

a political philosopher who possessed an even balance of extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing views, it is difficult to pinpoint Sorel on a political chart. As a result, it is also difficult to know, precisely, whether his views were more in line with Fascism or the extreme Left.

What we do know is that the Socialists had been calling for the state to take over the means of production in the people's name. Sorel's syndicalists despised this idea as "statist" or even "state capitalist." They envisioned a system in which the means of production would be put directly into the people's hands, without any state interference whatsoever – the workers would own and operate their factories and places of business exclusively.

The people would then be represented by occupation or "economic province," as opposed to geographic area. Society would be broken down into guilds or corporations (workers' bodies). All would be workers, and each economic grouping would control its own interests. Under this system, the state would eventually wither away or "undo" itself (in typical evolutionary Marxist fashion).

On its own, syndicalism was not as revolutionary or unique an idea as some would think. What *was* unique to Sorel's syndicalist concept was the corporative way in which society would be constructed. A central council made up of the representatives of all economic provinces would provide order for the new society.

This was Mussolini's National Council of Corporations. As John T. Flynn wrote, "the council would estimate capacities and necessities of the region, co-ordinate production, arrange for the necessary commodities and products inward and outward. A species of economic federation would thus replace the capitalist system."⁴¹

Inspired like many others by this daring new philosophy, the prominent Belgian Socialist, Emile Vandervelde had said: "...the function of the government is to govern, not to manage industrial enterprises. We shall come to a social system in which the functions of the state, organ of authority, are reduced to a minimum, *while the functions of the state, organ of management, are carried to a maximum.*"⁴² The people shall thus reap the rewards of an economic system in which all participate and all enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Revolutionary syndicalists had these four beliefs in common: 1) the repudiation of liberalism; 2) support for a planned economy; 3) planning must occur *outside* the political state; 4) the "producing groups" (or workers) must control the economic planning. Of course, the third point had the least in common with Fascist ideology, as everything was said to be within the State's jurisdiction.

III. Clerical Fascism

Clerical Fascism arose in late 1920s Italy with the signing of the Lateran Pacts which normalized

relations between the Italian state and the Vatican. Prior to this, a long-standing division between the Italian Kingdom and the Papacy had dated back to the Italian Unification period of the 1860s. The so-called “Roman Question” or who should reign supreme in the Eternal City, the Pope or the Italian government, was the crux of the problem. Mussolini believed he could solve this riddle by granting the Vatican a number of concessions. Hence, freemasonry was banned, religious instruction was promoted in public schools, the clergy no longer had to pay taxes, the Chigi Palace was donated to the Vatican, and cardinals were given free passes to travel by rail.

It should not be assumed that these concessions were either insincere or merely a political ploy, as Mussolini had frequently spoken out against atheism whilst also praising religion and the Roman Catholic faith in particular. Years prior to his negotiations with the Vatican, Mussolini was quoted as saying: “My spirit is deeply religious. Religion is a formidable force which must be respected and defended. I am, therefore, against anti-clerical and atheistic democracy, which represents an old and useless toy.”⁴³

Furthermore, Fascist beliefs regarding the family and marriage were also in concordance with the traditional views of the Church. In 1924 Mussolini banned contraceptives as part of his effort to boost Italy’s birthrate. This was promoted as the so-called “Battle for Births.” One of the more famous lines in this campaign was: “War is to men as childbirth is to

women.”⁴⁴ The Fascist ideal of *struggle* is manifested in this statement. Whether it is shooting a gun or birthing a child, *struggle* is ever-present in defining the character of the individual and the destiny of the nation.

At the conclusion of the Lateran Treaty, Mussolini had a new ally in the Church. And yet for all his concessions to Pope Pius XI, including a large cash sum, a treaty recognizing the full sovereignty of Vatican City, and a Concordat, Mussolini still came out of the Lateran Pact negotiations as the clear-cut victor. For he was able to do in three years, from the negotiations’ start to finish, what other Italian leaders could not achieve in decades. He solved the dreaded “Roman Question” and, for the first time in modern Italian history, normalized Italo-Vatican relations. The Lateran Pacts are thus remembered by historians, both sympathetic and hostile to Mussolini, as his finest hour as leader of Italy.

In the early 1920s the Catholic *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Popular Party) was in the midst of forming an alliance with the Reform Party. This act, many believe, could have upset Mussolini’s bid for power. In early October 1922, less than a month before Il Duce became head of state, Pope Pius XI ordered the clergy not to endorse the *Partito Popolare*, so as to guarantee the Church’s neutrality in secular matters. This lack of official papal support undercut both the Popular Party’s efforts and the broader alliance that had been forming against the Fascists. In 1923 the Vatican’s

Secretary of State met with Mussolini and agreed to dissolve the Popular Party, which was obviously regarded as a threat to the new regime and its hegemonic power. In return for this papal compromise, the Fascists made concessions to Catholic schools and institutions.

While it would be dishonest to claim that there was no longer any friction between the Vatican and the Fascist regime once the Lateran Treaty was signed, the Church did endorse many Fascist social policies and remained an ally of Mussolini to the end of the Second World War. The collaboration between the Church and the authoritarian regimes of Europe would haunt the legacy of the next pope (Pius XII) and would cause Catholics all over the world to reassess their belief in papal infallibility (at least in political matters) and the moral supremacy of their faith.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Military Adventures

By the 1930s, Mussolini decided to take a much more aggressive stance on foreign policy. Like his far-right contemporaries in other European countries, he wanted to procure more “living space” for the people of his nation. The first great test to his imperial ambitions came in July 1934, when the new chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler, had assassins kill the proto-fascist leader of Austria, Engelbert Dollfuss. This was done in a botched effort to secure a union (or *anschluss*) between Austria and Germany.

When Mussolini found out about Hitler’s covert operation, he was outraged. Italy had been in negotiations with France, Britain and Germany throughout the early 1930s to preserve the European balance of power. Having the Nazis on Italy’s northern border was a clear threat to that balance – so much so that Mussolini threatened to send the elite *Alpini* regiments north into Austria if Hitler should attempt to annex that nation into a Greater Germany. The threat worked, and Hitler backed off.

As far as similarities go between Mussolini and Hitler, there were not many. The one outstanding

feature they shared in common was their militaristic “trenchocratic” worldview, as both men were products of the First World War’s hellish environment at the front. The late historian of Fascism, George L. Mosse, highlighted some key differences in the backgrounds of the two leaders:

Mussolini’s long-range objectives were traditional: to create an empire built upon the example of ancient Rome. Hitler’s long-range goals of racial domination were not traditional. A wide gulf divided Adolf Hitler, the provincial whose exposure to the far-out racist sects of Vienna provided his intellectual awakening, and Mussolini, who emerged from the conflicts within international socialism. Mussolini confessed himself to be influenced by some of the masters of European thought – such men as Gustave Le Bon, Georges Sorel, William James, and Vilfredo Pareto – while Hitler, also a pupil of Le Bon, was mainly taken with the thoughts of obscure racist sectarians like Lanz von Liebenfels, Alfred Schuler, or Dietrich Eckart, who but for their disciple’s success would have remained deservedly unknown.⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, Italian Fascism was *deeper* intellectually than Nazism. Il Duce’s revolutionary movement was much more complex and open-ended than the Führer’s monolithic state-racism. The latter was clear-cut and defined from the start. The Italian movement, on the other hand, was steeped in a radical Leftist tradition from the time of the First World War.

Indeed, Italian Fascism developed out of the epic political debates that raged (primarily on the left) all throughout the period.

By the early 1930s, Mussolini was Fascist Europe's senior dictator. It is often overlooked that, at this time, Mussolini had possessed a personal dislike for Hitler's crude racism and general lack of worldliness. In fact, he greatly favored an alliance with France (a fellow Latin nation) in order to keep German aggression at bay. This desire led to the Stresa Conference of 1935, in which the Italian leader secured a consensus with the leaders of France and Britain. Essentially all parties agreed to stick together if Germany should step out of line.

The issue of Italian claims on Ethiopia, still a hot topic in Italian foreign politics, was deliberately not mentioned at Stresa. East Africa remained an Italian nationalist obsession ever since Italy's defeat at the Battle of Adua in 1896. It was a matter of national pride. If Italy could subdue and conquer the last bulwark of native African independence, Ethiopia – a country proud of its own long history – then Italy can regain her honor abroad and finally take her rightful seat among the imperial nations of Europe. For Mussolini and other war-hawks it was a matter of identity. Would Italy remain a provincial “southern” nation, or would she boldly seize her innate European-ness as the historic leader of Western Christian Civilization? The Ethiopian Question was far from being an obscure matter in 1930s Italy, as it was

inseparably tied to the question of the legitimacy of the Fascist State itself.

And so, in October 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia. The war lasted until May 1936. The upstart League of Nations rallied against Italy by imposing sanctions for alleged war crimes and breaches of international law, specifically the 1925 Geneva Protocol which banned the use of chemical and biological weapons.

The Second Italo-Abyssinian War, as it was called, drove Italy closer to signing the eventual Pact of Steel with Germany. This was a relationship not forged out of necessity, but out of a series of bad foreign policy decisions on the part of Mussolini. Here, many historians lose sight of the fact that an Italian alliance with Germany was far from inevitable. Hitler never forgot Mussolini's stalwart opposition to a German-Austrian *anschluss*. It was on account of this perceived slight that Hitler supplied Ethiopia with weapons to use against the Italians. Even after the war ended and the Italians were victorious, Hitler continued supplying weapons to Ethiopian rebels.

Then there was the matter of the South Tyrol – a region of northern Italy that has (to the present day) a German majority population. After Italy gained this territory from Austria at the end of the First World War, great tension brewed between ethnic Germans and Italians. From the German point of view, they were living under an Italian “occupation” which had no historical basis.

Further proving that an Italo-German alliance was far from inevitable was the fact that the ideologies of Fascism and Nazism are hardly “soulmates.” Whereas the former places its emphasis on having everything serve the State, the latter views the State as merely a tool serving the racialist aspirations of the Volk (or people).

In July 1936, two months after Fascist victory in East Africa, the Spanish Civil War broke out. General Francisco Franco, a true man of destiny, mounted a full-scale military insurrection against the murderous atheistic regime of the so-called Republicans. In reality, there was nothing remotely “republican” about this government; it was merely a working coalition of socialists, communists and liberals who all seemed to have a real fetish for killing Catholic priests and raping nuns.

Of course, the entire Catholic world was outraged at the behavior of the Republicans. Mussolini, who prided himself on being the leader of the *most Catholic* nation on earth, seemed to have no choice but to commit troops to the conflict on the side of the venerable General Franco. Mussolini’s decision went against the cautious advice of King Victor Emmanuel, who was concerned that this act would provoke the retaliation of France and Britain, thereby disturbing the European balance of power.

Nonetheless, approximately 50,000 Italians were sent to Spain, a combination of regular military units

and black shirts. The number of Italian troops sent was considerably greater than the German number, most likely because Mussolini knew he had more to gain from a Franco victory in the Mediterranean, as it would help counter Anglo-French naval supremacy. Hitler, on the other hand, did not need to lose sleep on Mediterranean geopolitics, as he had his own concerns in Central and Northern Europe.

If anything cemented an Italian-German alliance it was definitely the mutual contempt both governments had for the Anglo-French bloc. This mutual contempt drove Italy and Germany closer together as both the Fascists and National Socialists came to see that they had a number of shared geopolitical interests in common as land-based powers, in contrast to the sea-based Anglo-French powers.

Moreover, the hypocrisy with which Britain and France treated the newly unified nations of Italy and Germany was beyond absurd. On the one hand, Britain and France possessed an endless supply of colonies around the world which they exploited ruthlessly, and yet they passed judgment on the national aspirations of likeminded European states that lacked even basic natural resources. Many nationalist Italians and Germans believed that the colonies of the old decadent powers would do better in their possession. Certainly the Futurists, always ready to sing the praises of new blood, believed this as well.

In November 1936, the first reference was made to a Rome-Berlin Axis, “around which all European states, animated by a desire for collaboration and peace, can revolve.”⁴⁶ A year later, in November 1937, the Anti-Comintern Pact was signed by Italy, Germany and Japan. The Comintern was an abbreviated term for “Communist International,” which was set up in 1919 by Vladimir Lenin as an organization linking together all the communist parties of the world in their struggle against capitalism. The last World Conference held by the Stalinist Comintern, in 1935, pushed the concept of a “Popular Front” against Fascism. This effort supported the premise that all working-class parties should band together against the “terrorist dictatorship” wherever it arises. The nations of Italy, Germany and Japan were the prime targets of the Soviet campaign. Naturally, these targeted nations were going to form an alliance of their own. It is ironic in the extreme that Stalin should refer to any other nation on earth as a “terrorist dictatorship” when it was his own dictatorship that caused the premature deaths of as many as 20 million Soviet citizens.

In the wake of Hitler’s successful annexation of Austria in March 1938, Mussolini went before the Fascist Chamber and explained why he stood by while Germany swallowed up the smaller country. His passivity on the matter appeared as weakness to many Italians, and he lost a considerable amount of popular support as a result. This was not the same virile Duce that stopped Hitler in his tracks in 1934. Any plans for

a preemptive strike against Hitler to keep the Nazis away from the Italian border, and the vulnerable South Tyrol region, were abandoned to frivolous expeditions to the ends of the earth, from Ethiopia to Spain.

Former war veterans and patriots who had recent memories of Italy's fight to free herself from the Austro-German yoke in the Great War no doubt lost some respect for their leader. Rome's willing acceptance to take second place to Berlin went against everything the Fascists believed regarding Italy's sacred destiny as the leader of European Civilization.

Several months later, in September 1938, Mussolini played mediator at the historically infamous Munich Conference, where he supported Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland – a German-speaking part of western Czechoslovakia. Overall, the Munich Conference was another clear victory for National Socialist Germany. By early 1939, all of Czechoslovakia had been swallowed up. Mussolini's response was to swallow up some land as well – Albania. This act, coupled with the signing of the Pact of Steel between Italy and Germany, sealed Mussolini's fate as both junior partner to Hitler and enemy to France and Britain.

CHAPTER NINE

The Death of the Regime

The Second World War was disastrous for Italy; it spelled the death of the Mussolini regime. The Italian military was severely lacking in both modern weaponry and good strategic planning. Having had a real fight in Ethiopia before emerging victorious, Mussolini overestimated his own capabilities when it came time to fight first-rate (and even second-rate) European powers. Even some Fascists in his government were said to have had real reservations about entering the new European war.

To be sure, Mussolini was incompetent as a military strategist, as he had overextended his armed forces strategically in too many ways and on too many fronts. From North and East Africa, to France, the Balkans, Russia and beyond – Fascist Italy, under the command of Benito Mussolini, was doomed.

Il Duce's overarching incompetence led a second-rate Greek dictatorship to defeat him and nearly overrun and conquer all of Italian-occupied Albania in the process. Just some of the Italian military's problems included: not having any aircraft carriers, slow unimpressive fighter planes, lack of anti-aircraft

guns, lack of desert fighting abilities, outdated weaponry, poor military intelligence, and lack of communication between the different branches of the armed forces.⁴⁷

The best branch of the military, the Italian Navy, had been easily neutralized by Britain because it possessed no aircraft carriers and thus could not defend its ships properly, much less go on the offensive. This meant that Italian warplanes could not launch attacks by sea and could only protect its ships along the coast. The British capitalized, making short work of Mussolini's fleet.

Hitler came to Mussolini's aid in the Balkans in March 1941. With Nazi help, the Italians were finally able to subdue Greece and devastate Yugoslavia. Meanwhile a month later, Italy's East African Empire (consisting of Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia) was lost to the British. In August, securing his status as the greatest military blunderer of all time, Mussolini sent 10 divisions to Russia – essentially never to be heard from again. Then in October, he expressed a desire to send 10 more. Yet another blunder: Mussolini declared war on the United States after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. All of these miscalculations and disasters led historian Peter Neville to conclude: "[Mussolini] would have done much better to have initiated Franco's wily pragmatism; the Spanish dictator could never be lured into a world war on Hitler's side."⁴⁸

The Italian economy was the other aspect which guaranteed defeat. German coal was a necessary import to fuel the Fascist war machine, and it soon grew scarce. Unlike the other “Great Powers,” Italy had very limited natural resources. And its autarkic economy was based on limited trade with the outside world.

By 1943 King Victor Emmanuel was persuaded that Mussolini must be sacked as leader of Italy. Leading Fascists, such as Count Ciano and Marshal Badoglio, had already been conspiring to overthrow their beloved Duce, as political necessity seemed to demand it. Nevertheless, with defeat all around him and his nation under siege, Mussolini (resilient as ever) believed that German muscle would still be able to save Italy from its darkest days.

On July 24, the Fascist Grand Council assembled to vote on a resolution put forth by Foreign Minister Dino Grandi to end Mussolini’s reign. The vote passed. The next day Victor Emmanuel informed Mussolini that “Italy has gone to bits” and that the Duce was now “the most hated man in Italy.”

Mussolini was then arrested and imprisoned on the island of Ponza, before being moved to a ski resort on the Gran Sasso at 2,000 meters above sea level. It was on the Gran Sasso that the dashing SS officer Otto Skorzeny famously rescued the Duce, flying him out of captivity in a storch light plane. Amazingly, this was a bloodless mission; the *carabinieri* (who had been

holding the Duce) cooperated fully. The former Italian dictator finally met up with his family in Vienna – with everyone except his son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, who had now lined up against him.

On September 15, 1943, Hitler and Mussolini (now master and servant) met once again at the Führer's wartime headquarters in East Prussia. At this meeting Hitler gave Mussolini his orders to essentially submit and become a Nazi puppet in northern Italy. He informed the humbled (and now emaciated-looking Duce) that the South Tyrol, the Trentino and the city of Trieste would all be annexed to the Greater German Reich – thereby reversing the hard-won territorial gains for which 600,000 Italians gave their lives in the First World War. Hitler also demanded a greater number of Italian workers to be sent to Germany to work in war industries. There the Italians frequently endured worse treatment than Allied POWs.⁴⁹ Roughly one million Italian workers were enslaved.

And so, upon orders of the Führer, Mussolini was immediately installed as a puppet ruler in a North Italian town named Salò. His new government was officially baptized: The Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*), better known simply as the “Salò Republic.” Ironically, at this stage of his life, as an official pawn of the Nazi regime, Mussolini seemed to revert back to the socialism of his youth. This, no doubt, served two purposes: to garner support from the growing socialist element in Italy and to repudiate the capitalistic forces (i.e. Big Business, the

bourgeoisie, and aristocracy) which had so willingly stabbed their former leader in the back.

Some writers go out of their way to portray the Salò Republic as a purer incarnation of the Fascist State, set up without the aid of the Italian king, Pope, or bourgeoisie, thus making it a sort of Fascist utopia closer to the one envisioned by a younger, more idealistic Mussolini in his original Fascist Manifesto and 11-point program. This is not altogether true, however. The primary feature of Salò was its dual status as a Nazi vassal and buffer state, set up to protect the Greater Reich from all Allied advances northward.

Certainly, years before when he was younger, Mussolini never would have envisioned his ideal state to be a weak satellite of another power, much less a German one! Toward his final days, Mussolini's worst nightmares were made a reality as he had come to rely totally on Hitler – the man he used to refer to as a “barbarian” and disregard as a crude emulator of Italian Fascism. And so, Il Duce now looked north to Hitler for his orders out of both fear and obligation. (Certainly, by this time, there was not much mutual admiration on the parts of either side.) It was a humiliating existence. And for this humiliation, intensified by both Allied and German occupation, the majority of Italian people never forgave their former leader.

The immediate goals of the short-lived Salò Republic were twofold: to reform the Fascist

movement and to take revenge on the traitors who had deposed the Duce. This latter goal was achieved, in part, at the January 1944 trial in Verona. It was here that both Ciano and the old Fascist war leader Emilio de Bono were executed. It was said that Mussolini's daughter Edda (who was married to Ciano) never forgave her father for murdering her husband.

Emerging from the Congress of Verona, in November 1943, was the Republican Fascist Party. The progressive program which emerged alongside the Party, as part of its platform, included the following: an end to the Monarchy, a republican government, and popular sovereignty – features which were all supposed to be implemented in the original Fascist program over twenty years before. The conservative features of the Congress included the labeling of Jews as aliens, and the official recognition of Catholicism as Italy's one and only religion.

Upon further investigation, Mussolini's new progressive program was quite bizarre, given his role as a Nazi puppet. In the Social Republic decree of February 1944, he outlined plans for uncultivated land to be allotted to farmers' cooperatives, the socialization of industrial production, profit sharing in private industries, the establishment of a Constituent Assembly, a greater role for labor unions, a free press, an independent judiciary, and an investigation into the corruption of the hierarchy of the former Fascist regime. Here then were laid the theoretical foundations of a sort of Democratic Fascism.

Neville dismisses the claim that the noble principles of Salò “freed Fascism from the ‘pluto-monarchical’ compromises of 1922.”⁵⁰ As evidence, he states the fact that all of the aforementioned parts of the decree were, again, never implemented. Whenever Mussolini was faced with the choice of democratizing his nation or strengthening his personal grip on power, he always chose the latter.

On April 28, 1945, Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci were executed by partisans who had found them near Lake Como. Their lifeless corpses were then degradingly hung upside down in a Milanese piazza for all to see. Two days later Hitler reportedly killed himself and his new bride Eva Braun in a bunker under the Reichstag.

By 1945, some 400,000 Italians were killed in all the wars of the Fascist regime; 3 million Italian houses were destroyed or damaged in addition to countless bridges and roads; the post-war inflation rate was astronomical; and millions of Italians went hungry.⁵¹

The Second World War had taken a terrible toll on the Italian nation – a nation which was supposed to be at the core of all Fascist policies and the primary concern of all Fascists. To be sure, *Bella Italia* was still loved by the majority of ordinary Italians but, for what was perceived as his dereliction of duty, ordinary Italians would come to revile Mussolini’s name for decades to come.

And although many Italians would go on to revile the Fascist state ideology as well, the demise of said ideology would not be as decisive an event as the death of Mussolini the man. While one can indeed assassinate a leader, one cannot assassinate an entire philosophy. For the Fascists, the concept of *struggle* was an omnipresent reality, something to be embraced and lauded in the Nietzschean tradition.

There could be no timetables put on the achievement of ultimate victory, either on the individual level of the citizen or on that of the national collective. In this process, the edification of the State is paramount. Just as in ancient times, “all roads led to Rome,” for the Fascist all roads lead to the State – the sole power having the capacity to centralize all national abilities and productive forces for the greater good of the national collective. Love him or hate him, Mussolini understood this better than anyone. And so, before we prematurely declare Fascism dead in this postmodern age of ours, we must remember Il Duce’s haunting words, spoken just before his assumption of power:

Our movement is still in its prehistoric period and in process of formation; its real history begins tomorrow. All that Fascism has accomplished thus far has been negative. Now it must begin to reconstruct. In this way its force, its spirit and its nobility will appear.⁵²

¹ Gallo, Max. *Mussolini's Italy: Twenty Years of the Fascist Era*. New York: Macmillan, 1973, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ Duggan, Christopher. *Francesco Crispi, 1818-1901: From Nation to Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁴ Gallo, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵ Marinetti, F. T. 1915. "The Futurist Manifesto." <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html> (downloaded Sep. 4, 2006).

⁶ Marinetti, F. T. 1915. "War, the World's Only Hygiene." <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/war.html> (downloaded Sep. 5, 2006).

⁷ Quaranta di San Severino, Bernardo. *Mussolini: As Revealed in His Political Speeches (November 1914 – August 1923)*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1923, p. 225.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹ De Grand, Alexander. *The Italian Nationalist Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Mack Smith, Denis. *Italy: A Modern History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp. 27-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁶ Steele, David Ramsay. "The Mystery of Fascism." <http://www.la-articles.org.uk/fascism.htm> (downloaded Sep. 30, 2006).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Gallo, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ Neville, Peter. *Mussolini*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 33.

²⁰ Gallo, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁴ Mack Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

²⁵ Gallo, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

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- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ²⁷ Neville, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ²⁸ Flynn, *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 43.
- ²⁹ Gallo, *op. cit.*, p. 97-8.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ³¹ Ascoli, Max. Ed. 1998. *My Rise and Fall*. Da Capo Press, New York, pp. 273-82.
- ³² Neville, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.
- ³³ Mussolini, Benito. 1968. *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*. Howard Fertig, Inc., New York, pp. 179-80.
- ³⁴ Neville, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-9.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ³⁶ Mussolini, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- ³⁷ Mussolini, Benito. 1935. *Four Speeches on the Corporate State*. Laboremus, Rome, p. 9.
- ³⁸ Mussolini, Benito. 1968. *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*. Howard Fertig, Inc., New York, p. 144; Mussolini, Benito. 1935. *Four Speeches on the Corporate State*. Laboremus, Rome, pp. 101-2.
- ³⁹ "Rerum Novarum: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Capital and Labor," https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html (downloaded Nov. 12, 2006).
- ⁴⁰ "Quadragesimo Anno: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Reconstruction of the Social Order," https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html (downloaded Nov. 12, 2006).
- ⁴¹ Flynn, John T. 1973. *As We Go Marching*. Free Life Editions, New York, p. 31.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.
- ⁴³ Quaranta di San Severino, *op. cit.*, p. xii.
- ⁴⁴ Neville, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ⁴⁵ Mosse, George L. 1999. *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism*. Howard Fertig, Inc., New York, pp. 39-40.
- ⁴⁶ Neville, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵² Quaranta di San Severino, *op. cit.*, p. 156.